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DURHAM TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE**



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THE FINAL DRAFT

LITERARY JOURNAL
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THE FINAL DRAFT LITERARY JOURNAL
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COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT SENATE.**

COVER ART BY JOSÉ VALLE
CREATIVE AGE (INTRODUCTORY POEM) BY JOSÉ VALLE

Word by word,
Page by page;
A world created,
Creative age.

Words to please,
Disgust, enrage;
Feelings summoned,
Creative age.

Discover the key,
Destroy the cage;
We welcome you to
our Creative Age.

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ART PIECES BY ERIC J. HILL, EMMA STOUMEN, JONATHAN HARTMAN, BRITNEY BALMER, AND BERNARD LILES FOUND
THROUGHOUT THE PUBLICATION.

INTRODUCTION

Every year *The Final Draft* is given submissions. These are the voices unheard, unseen or unwritten that now have a chance to make themselves known. Their uniqueness shines and the purpose of their words become profound, meaningful. The vast wealth of creativity that springs from the pages within, the lives it contains speak to our readers. So as you wander through the lives set forth upon these pages, please explore their stories. Let yourself be enveloped by their fountain of ideas and views, let their words sway your heart for just a little while. Because they have ours, and I personally cannot be any prouder of the submissions and the staff that shaped *The Final Draft* this year.

~ **R. Grey Ludlum**

Final Draft Editor, 2014-2015



EDITOR PICKS

ART

PIECE BY ERIC J. HILL

Once in a blue moon you come upon works of art that truly are something else. The piece on the following page by Eric J. Hill really speaks volumes about his style and creative eye. As you'll see while you flip through this book, Mr. Hill has developed a genre all his own. He combines the living with the robotic, making these beautiful hybrids I could only wish to imagine in my wildest dreams.

Natural and artificial. Neon and nature. These are themes that have been combined before but that have been given new life by a rising artist. Every time I look at Hill's pieces I see something new. An essence of life so strong exudes from them that I expect them to come off the page. Though such pieces coming to life would likely lead to disaster and destruction, it is a risk I would be willing to take.

Believe me. Look through these pages. Find more of Hill's work. It won't be long before you'll want to be living in the world he has created, too.

~ **José Valle**

Final Draft Art Editor, 2014-2015



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FICTION

"LOOKING FOR TROUBLE" BY JAMES BARROW

There were a great number of creative and well-written works of short fiction submitted to the Final Draft for publication this year. Selecting a favorite, as it were, was a difficult challenge amidst such a diverse collection as is represented by this book. And, as the Final Draft has never before bestowed such an honor as "Editor's Choice" in any of its past editions, I found myself left to my own devices in making the decision.

Some stories had the effect of a lightning bolt upon my psyche - their effect was instantaneous. Others were like the tide - no matter how I felt when I first started reading the story, it drew me into its depths, calling to me. For their success in confounding my senses with their literary gems, I offer each and every contributing author of fiction my hearty congratulations.

However, the piece "Looking for Trouble," submitted by contributing author James Barrow, rises above the rest. While I am admittedly biased in favor of the Speculative Fiction genre, that is not why I selected this piece. I found in this work a poignant, well-written, and hilariously witty answer to the question, "What would happen to humanity if all of our problems simply... disappeared?"

The work is speculative fiction at the genre's best, enabling the reader to explore a world that is alien enough to our own to be fascinating, and yet similar enough to our own to make us think. The reader laughs - or weeps - as the world cleanses itself of its worst problems, including bratty younger siblings and country music. They ponder the predicament of Michael McMindblown as he demonstrates our very human tendency to create our own worst problems, and how that tendency often results in rather catastrophic consequences. I barely touched the work with my editor's pen - the story first appeared on my desk a near-seamless whole, and to undo too much of the stitching myself, I felt, would insult the artifice of the author.

I offer sincere congratulations and thanks to Mr. Barrow for his valuable contribution to our publication, and to the reader for opening this book, and reading this page. You're in for a treat.

~Andrew J. McCrae

Final Draft Fiction Editor, 2014-2015

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

JAMES BARROW

Following the Great Conflict of 2098, which nearly resulted in nuclear war, the world realized that blowing everything up was not an effective means of resolving minor differences. At the famous Great Summit of the Year after the World Almost Exploded, leaders from every country pledged to end all wars and uphold a new global peace. The next several hundred years were spent enthusiastically solving the earth's greatest problems: Hunger was vanquished, poverty annihilated, and all conflicts between the nations were resolved. Then the minor issues were addressed: unemployment, organized crime, the necessary elimination of country music. Finally, in a surge of enthusiasm from unrivaled success, the remaining inconveniences were sought and destroyed: Appliances no longer broke down, younger siblings stopped trying to ride in the front seat, and people actually matched their profile pictures on dating websites. Not a single problem survived the onslaught.

The earth then enjoyed fifty years of total peace and quiet, leaving its inhabitants unspeakably bored. In the year 2461, a young businessman by the name of George Monger founded the first mail order problem service. He called it the Problem Depot. Its catalogs displayed a variety of do-it-yourself problem kits as well as ready-made problems. "Think you can do it? We can stop you," was its motto.

The Problem Depot was an immediate success. Its line of Just-Add-Fire instant cooking disasters received numerous awards for the innovative use of chemistry and combustible ingredients. Orders poured in from all over the world for simple self-sabotage packages. Information Technology experts were sent incredibly effective viruses to complicate their lives. Despite its alleged participation in several get-poor-quick scams, the Problem Depot remains the leading problem provider to this day.

It so happened that one lovely day in the city of Serenity, Michael Mc-Mindblown drove home from a perfect day at the office, having accomplished an enormous amount of work. He hated it.

He soon arrived at his pleasant suburban home. As he ate a snack and checked his email, he noticed a problem supplier's ad. Up to this point, Michael had considered problem delivery nothing more than a passing fad, but this advertisement intrigued him a little. He researched the supplier and the product. The company offered free and immediate shipping, and guaranteed a unique and exciting experience. When he noticed the reasonable price, and read a few shining reviews from individuals whose lives had been completely wrecked by the product, Michael decided to try it out, and clicked the "add to cart" icon. Closing his laptop once he had completed the order, Michael rose to find something substantial he could call dinner when the doorbell rang.

It was a delivery man holding a package. Michael didn't remember ordering anything within the last few days, but he took the package anyway, and tipped the man two time bills. Time bills had been introduced in the year 2332. At that time, despite the combined efforts of economists everywhere, nearly all forms of

money suffered major inflation, and it had looked as if this trend would continue. Economists determined that they needed a new universal standard, something valuable to back the money, much like the gold standard of long ago. This was considered impossible until someone suggested the time standard. Recalling that time is money, all nations agreed to base a new form of currency on time. Dollar bills were replaced with time bills, each backed by a certain unit of time.

This system worked incredibly well. In fact, from the time it was established to the modern day, the time bill has not depreciated in value a single second. No one was quite sure what the time that supposedly backed their bills was good for, or how it could be redeemed, but very few people really cared. This general lack of insight had two primary causes. First, the intelligence of the people had steadily decreased since the eliminations of problems. And second, anyone who questioned the value of the time bill was immediately gunned down by government snipers.

Michael laid the package on the dining room table. "I'll open it after dinner," he thought and continued his hunt for food. The doorbell rang again. "What now," he said out loud as he closed the fridge door. Whoever it was impatiently rang a second time. Michael ran to the door. "Yes?"

"Sir," said the sharply dressed man, "I'm Special Agent Painford with the Federal Bureau of Problematic Investigations. Our intelligence reports that you have just received a package of highly illegal content. I'm gonna have to inspect your home."

Michael was shocked. He let the agent in and showed him the package.

"It's what I thought," said the agent, looking inside the now opened cardboard box. "Sir, you need to come with me."

Two hours later, Michael found himself in a dark room with a single blinding light, shining directly into his eyes. He had been brought blindfolded, and had absolutely no idea where he was. He was rather pleased with how the day was turning out. His pleasure ceased when the interrogation began. He could hear Agent Painford's voice shouting at him from behind the light, joined by another voice he recognized, but couldn't quite decide where from. They asked about the package, but Michael didn't even know where it came from, or what it contained. His questioners thought he was withholding information, and the interrogation quickly intensified. Several teeth lost later, they finally left him to think over his situation.

He was tied to a chair with the light still pulverizing his eyesight. He turned his head as much as he could, and strained to see what kind of room they had locked him in. His eyes took a while to adjust, but he could tell that he was in a long narrow space with metal walls. His chair was crudely made of metal, and was bolted to the floor. Painford had fastened his hands to a vertical bar-like piece of the chair's back with large zip ties. As Michael felt behind his back, he touched a bolt about halfway up the bar. Fingering this, he pricked his thumb on the screw that protruded about an eighth of an inch from the bolt. It was sharp! Michael started vigorously rubbing the zip tie over the screw's tip. Now he was having fun. This was his kind of problem. When he got home, he would cancel the order he had made earlier that evening; this was plenty of excitement to satisfy him for a month or more.

Seven minutes later, he had freed his hands. What now? He stood up and walked to the far side of the room. The door was made of even thicker metal than the walls and...it was opening! Michael jumped back. Painford stepped in and drew his pistol in alarm. "Hands where I can see 'em! Back against the wall!" he cried. "Trying to escape, eh? What was your plan? Rip through the sheet metal with your bare hands? I'm starting to wonder why I even bother with you. Tell you what: you either tell me everything you know about the package, or I redecorate the walls with your brain matter!"

Michael cowered. He was beginning to realize that these must not be real cops. Oh, what had he gotten himself into? "I've told you all I know. Please believe me!" he begged. He collapsed on the floor into a pitiful puddle of pulp.

"There you go again, giving me nothing. You know what I do with prisoners who don't deliver?"

Deliver? Why did that word stick out to Michael? Then he had it. He knew where he had heard the other man's voice! He raised his head. "That's not a real gun, is it?"

Painford still wore the same murderous stare, and for a moment Michael thought for sure he would shoot. Then, slowly, Painford relaxed. "Yep," he said. "What gave it away?"

Michael sighed in relief. "Your friend—I recognized his voice. He was the delivery man from earlier today. This must be the problem I ordered. But how'd it come so fast?"

"Sorry sir, that's a trade secret." He paused. "Chris, we're done here," he called to his partner and walked out.

"Wait a second!" Michael cried, stepping out of what he now realized was an adapted storage unit. "You can't just threaten to kill me and then walk away! Come back here. I don't even know where I am!"

"Your house is two blocks to the north," Painford called over his shoulder as he and his partner climbed into a pickup truck. "Thank you for your service. We hope you order from us again." They drove off.

* * *

"Hello. Thank you for calling Big Problem Inc. How may I help you?" asked the lady who answered Michael's call.

"Um, yes. I recently ordered a problem from your company, and was very displeased with your product. Would you believe they held me at gunpoint and threatened to shoot me! You can get PTSD from something like that, you know?"

"I am very sorry for your unpleasant experience. Let me transfer you to the refund manager. We may be able to send you a time check as compensation."

Michael sighed. "What good is time money when...?" He was trying to ask, "What good is time money when it's the psychological effects that I'm worried about?" But before he could finish his sentence, he was shot by a government sniper.

POETRY



"MISSISSIPPI CASTLES" BY SHAUN TERRY

A poem is, at its essence, a way of communicating our experience of feeling. The dozens of poems submitted to this issue of *The Final Draft* not only reflected a diverse range of stories and subject matter but also reflected the myriad of ways poetry allows us to express those experiences. Poems ranged from in-depth narratives to snapshots of conversation and scenery. In particular, *Mississippi Castles* by Shaun Terry stands out as an example of the way the language and images of poetry convey feeling and narrative.

Mississippi Castles is filled with images that bring us into the sensory world of the poem's narrative, such as the "foam crescendos" the speaker describes crashing in the background. These images provide an accessible picture of the southern environment the poem's subject reflects. Likewise, the language of the narrative with its heavy use of alliteration and allusions to the historical forces that shaped the south give depth to the images' width. The result is a powerful snapshot of one woman drawn poignantly within the rich context of her environment.

~ Olivia Simpson

Final Draft Poetry Editor, 2014-2015

MISSISSIPPI CASTLES

SHAUN TERRY

She rests on tin bedfeathers.
Her heart oscillates
with the sound of foam crescendos,
splashing into the fickle floor.
The walls sweat,
awaiting the warmth of her bellows.
“Compromise” is a word that describes what Benedict Arnold felt;
she doesn’t know this word.
She is parting with parasites
that have plagued her.
Shining instruments shake,
and sing endless songs.
Sweet drinks from hidden French provinces
fill half-full bellies.
Plump, round pearls form a perfect oval
about the trunk of her head.
A globe
- that archaic artifact of expansion and wonder -
rests near a joint of two walls,
in her craftily curated home.
She’ll point out Mauritania,
if you’re invited.
Her pillows are soft and neat.
Her rocking chair is fair and firm.
She’ll play delta blues
on a chrome harmonica,
if you’re invited.
She knows what she wants.

FALL FLASH FICTION CONTEST

FIRST PLACE: SUBMISSION #3 BY CAITLIN MORGAN

She can't breathe, it's happening again. The voices in her head are overcoming her again. Run, run now is all she can think. Flash forward twenty minutes and she finds herself in complete darkness. Known to the world as Carissa she is now fully embodied by Sasha. Carissa is a good girl always doing the right thing, straight A's in school and she's never even thought about a boyfriend but, now she Sasha. Sasha walks the streets of New York looking for her next fix. The men call her Sasha and that's all she'll ever know. At this time all she's worried about is getting the next hopeless victim to slow down and let her in their car. "Hey Sasha baby, climb in." Now, it begins.

SECOND PLACE: SUBMISSION #7 BY EMILY HAMRICK

It started with a tree. Growing seemingly out of the depths of the ocean. There was no other land to be seen for miles.

It grew into a giant reaching higher than any other tree before. Soon more trees emerged, smaller trees that seemed to be made up of many trunks twisted together. Each of these trees had something like steps leading up to a spacious room almost like a space people could live in.

I created this space as a place of peace and learning that anyone in the many realms could go to. I am what some may call a god a higher being. But, I am just a realm-walker, someone who can travel between realms and create beings within that realm.

I have been alive for many years and this will be my last masterpiece. Soon my powers will pass onto someone else and will continue to do so until the end of time.

As I feel my strength I see the future this island and I have created will have. I see the dark and light beings come here together in peace for the first time in many years. I see the creatures who will come here to learn about their past. Finally, I see the many realm-walkers who will come after me keeping the peace in the place.

And it all started with a tree...

FALL FLASH FICTION CONTEST

THIRD PLACE: SUBMISSION #12 BY RABIA ABBASI

Mrs. Clay smiled at the kids dressed as superheroes and gave them each a piece of Kit Kat.

Both Mr & Mrs. Clay where the perfect couple in everyone eye's, but no one knew the truth. Mrs. Clay was punched, slapped every time something went wrong. She was tired of this life & decided to do something.

Today, Halloween was the perfect opportunity for her. The streets are filled with noise kids and no one would hear the screams.

She was giving out candy when her husband yelled "Woman, get me a beer."

She closed the door and went to the kitchen to get the beer. Instead of the beer she grabbed a knife & went to the couch and sat beside her husband.

"Where I my beer, you worthless woman?"

She didn't respond. Her husband yanked her hair. As soon as she saw the chance. She stabbed him in the heart.

She started to laugh and cry at the same time. Realizing what she had done she went to her room & rummaged through her closet & found a gun. She put on her forehead & said "I'm finally free," before shooting herself.

HONORABLE MENTION: SUBMISSION #5 BY EMILY PAKES

She'd been hearing about it for months. A murmur here, a sighting there. She'd often wondered why her students took so long on their bathroom breaks. And then it happened – one didn't come back. She waited in her office that night until the familiar sound of the janitor latching the Double doors shut. Slinking past the motion sensors, she crept towards the Collins building Ladies room. Her hand felt the Cold steel of the door panel as she leaned in, inching the door open. A low Gurgle Startled her – was it a plugged drain? She slipped past the door, closing it inch by inch, as not to make a sound. "Hello?" – it echoed off the back wall. The gurgle became more pronounced. The lights – triggered by the motion sensor – clicked on just in time for her to see a tentacle-covered arm grasp her right leg. "NOOOOO!" she screamed. But it was too late. She had been captured by...THE COLLINS KRACKEN!

FALL FLASH FICTION CONTEST

HONORABLE MENTION: SUBMISSION #11 BY YAZMIN GIBBS

It's Freezing in here, I think I have phenomena now. Staring at these four walls they haunted me, mocked me. Every so often they close in on me, seems like they are going to kill me. But! They back up as soon as they are close to killing me.

Shivering from the cold you may think its could but its not really cold. My body is so cold, every hour it heats up then gets cold again. I might be going through withdrawal. I need that needle. He tortures me some days: not letting me have it.

Here I am 19 years old, a 1 year old son, nice house, good family and a straight A student. How did I end up here

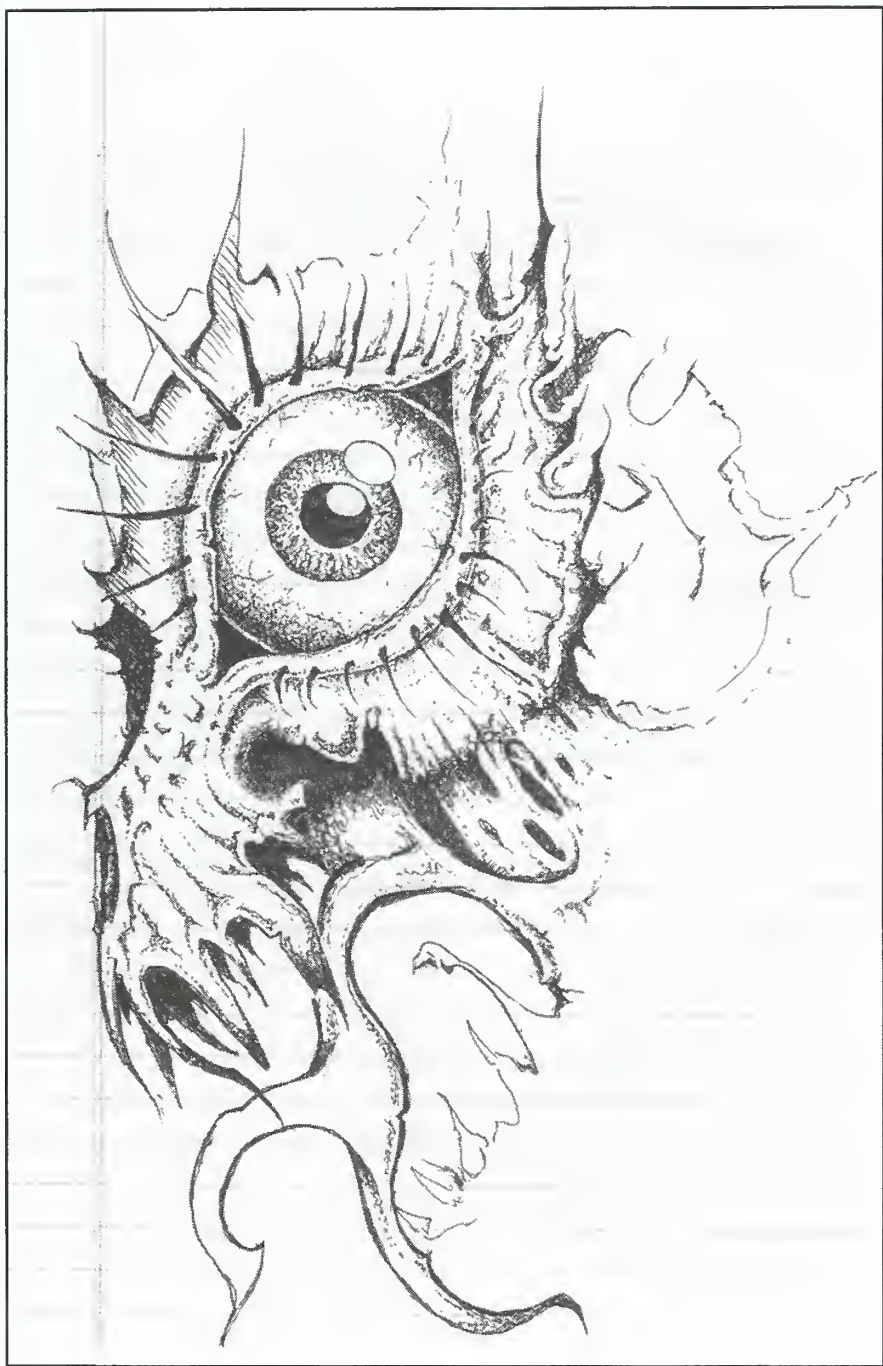
I don't even know how long its been. It's so dark, I can't see I crawl into the corner I've been doing my business in for a while now and relieve myself. Then crawl back into my other corner

I wish I was dead this is worse than death. I barely eat or drink, he's the reason why I'm here. I wonder why I'm still alive. Lord what did I do to deserve this. "HELP ME." I screamed for the umpteenth time today.

I blame this on him, He's the reason why I'm here. I hate my life. I thought he loved me. I thought my family loved me. Did they even notice I was gone? If I see Him again I'm gonna kill him with my cheetah print 9 millimeter.

I'm not even mad any more though I'm numb to the fact people who I thought was my friends really wasn't. People used me, played me for a damn fool. If I get out of here, me and my son are going far away from here. I'm weak though. The only reason I'm holding on to hope is because of my son. Lord how I miss him My son is all I have left. FUCK FAMILY. Fuck Friends.

The sound of the door being open pulled me away from my thoughts. MY NEEDLE.



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THE HUNT

EMMA STOUMEN

Damp fog crept low along the ground, weaving its way around sparse greenery and shrubs. It poked its way into every hole, slunk around all the sapling stumps, and reached into any nook it could find. Soon, all was covered in the haze. Wet quietness pressed in on all the forest's inhabitants, who quickly skittered back into their homes. It was not the time to be outside, when your senses were muddled with the mist. A single nut quivering on its branch finally gave way, falling to the earth in a burst of echoing sound in the perfectly silent woods. It was slowly swallowed up by the hungry mist, not to be seen for quite some time. Amid the growing white emptiness, two lone figures huddled together behind a large, gnarled bush. Both, no older than ten, wielded hunter's bows, and had placed themselves downwind of what was hopefully their dinner for tonight. The smaller, lankier one adjusted his blue fur-lined coat and fidgeted with his seal-hide boots. Noticing this, his partner frowned and scolded him as quietly as she could.

"Brion, you gotta be alert. The elk could be here at any time." She emphasized her last point by holding her bow at the ready, as if to shoot into the white haze. Brion looked at her blankly. This was, in fact, their sixteenth unsuccessful attempt at a hunt. He knew - he had been counting. It didn't seem to deter Orla though. Even now, she stood tensed for a giant buck to leap in front of them. As Brion glanced over at her, he noticed that her extra hours of training had paid off. Despite its thickness, he could tell that muscles bulged under her coat. The fur's pattern became offset in an odd manner, making the complex, swirling designs jagged. Brion couldn't help but feel slightly unsettled by this. He couldn't figure out why, however, since it was, after all, simply a coat. Coats become uneven constantly, and this one shouldn't be any different. As Brion pondered the ways of coat-fur to himself, Orla turned to him to suggest they move position, catching him staring glaze-eyed at her. "What?" she hissed, confusedly pulling her bow back to her body, almost self consciously. "What the heck are you staring at?" Brion blinked rapidly, and was about to explain that even the most detailed fur coats can create chaotic images, when he paused. There had been a ripple in the air, extremely subtle. It had lasted for only a mere heartbeat, the slightest breath of wind interrupting the fog's prowl across the forest floor. The wind carried with it a scent that both Brion and Orla had caught. They began taking deep breaths, mouths parted to taste the dank air in an attempt to pinpoint the location of what they hoped would finally be a catch. One look between them was all the agreement they needed before the two were gone from the bush, the vaporous mist rushing to fill any evidence of their existence.

Brion crept as low to the ground as he could manage while still being able to lift his feet. As the terrain became increasingly rocky the more uphill he went, he found himself regretting not joining Orla in those extra training sessions. He couldn't see through the blanket of white fog, which was still an advantage at this point, but at the same time, not knowing when he would be able to stop only made the burning in his legs more pronounced. His breathing turned ragged and

shallow, the cold air stinging on the way in. Even as the aching need to lay down and rest crept inside him, Brion forced himself forward, thinking of the people back in his tribe. This hunting season had been a poor one, as had many before it. Even though Brion had always known hunger, the elders always talked of times when food was bountiful, and no child went to bed with an empty stomach. Now, even though the youngest were always fed first, cries were heard at night for sustenance that wouldn't come. With these thoughts circling around in his head, Brion pressed on with the rising dream of finding enough food to return to the days of plenty.

Finally the ground evened out, and Brion turned. He was now above the low-set fog, and catching his breath, he strained his eyes for his target. For a few moments, the forest was as quiet as it had been. Then, very cautiously, a figure shifted in the haze. A male elk raised its head, fog dancing around its antlers while its eyes pierced the whiteness, its nostrils flaring. Brion crouched as quietly as he could, trying not to alert the buck to his presence. As stiff as the trees surrounding it, the elk breathed hard for any scents to alert it. Satisfied that it was still safe, the elk twitched its ears and went back to grazing. Brion expanded his lungs as far as they would go, filling them with the coldness. He needed to clear his mind. He had only actually attempted a real hunt a few times before, which had not ended well. His instructor always yelled at him for not following the seemingly simple approach. All he had to do was run after the elk, steering it towards the bottom of the hill where Orla waited, ready to strike. It seemed like a good plan. However, as Brion silently crept forward on padded boots, he caught a shadow of the buck in the fog. What if the plan failed? If they missed this opportunity, who knew when they would get another chance to eat? He was uphill. It was much more tactical for him to take a shot at this position. At this thought, his heart began to race. He had memorized all the points on the body to hit for a clean kill. It should be quick and easy. As he readied his bow, he ran through the list in his head. 'Broadside. Best position to penetrate heart and lungs.' He fixed the string in its slot. 'Quartering away shot. Not the best, must wait until arrow will be in line with the far front leg about...one-third to...one-half up the elk's body cavity.' His fingers slipped as he grasped an arrow, nearly dropping it. He tried to steady himself and focus on the kill shots. 'Head on. Risky. Leave to the higher tier hunters.' He finally managed to fit an arrow in its place and drew it back, straining against the taut string.

As he positioned himself, he recalled that he never really could hit targets quite as well as Orla. Doubt suddenly flooded over him, making his hands waver. Maybe the original plan was actually a good idea. Before he could decide to retract his bow, the elk suddenly raised its head. Brion froze, his heart beat drumming in his chest. He could sense it now: the wind had changed. The elk craned its neck towards Brion, its nostrils rapidly opening and closing. He dared not move. As close as he was, he would be lucky not to be mauled by the beast. Despite his greatest wishes to suddenly disappear, the elk began cautiously making its way towards him, stomping every now and again as a warning. Brion was about to get up and run while he still could, when he saw it. The perfect shot, straight into the elk's chest. If he could pull this off, he'd be the village's savior. He had little time. Soon the elk would be too close, and bear down on him with

its massive antlers. Brion pulled his bow tight again, pressing the chilled length of the arrow to his cheek. He saw only the splayed fur of the elk's chest moving in the dense fog. As it moved, the fur twisted and contorted in jagged patterns. As Brion began to relax, ready to release his arrow, the wind changed yet again. The fog suddenly rushed to cover the massive creature. Brion looked around frantically, until he caught sight of jagged fur much farther off. The elk must have retreated. He adjusted as quickly as he could, and let go, a satisfying hiss trailing after his soaring arrow. He could hear it hit, followed by a muffled cry of pain.

Jumping up in victory, he started walking towards his kill, when a sharp snort alerted him to a presence much closer to him. The elk stood to his left, eyes wide. As soon as Brion stood, it bleated out an aggressive warning, and began pawing madly at the ground, spraying dirt everywhere. Terror clawed at Brion's chest. The animal towered over him. If he stayed here, he would die, crushed to death by food. The minute he ran, the elk would charge. However, despite his increasing panic, he managed to remember that there were trees everywhere. He glanced behind him, and gambled that he could sprint fast enough to make it to the biggest tree before being trampled. The elk reared its head as Brion took off, dropping his bow, adrenaline making him forget everything but making it to the top of that one tree. The pounding of hooves thundered behind him, matching the pounding in his chest. Brion could feel nothing, even as he scrambled up the rough bark, fighting for footholds and branches to grab. Just as he was nearing a safe height, an ear splitting noise rang out and his vision shook, the tree under him vibrating madly. He looked down and saw that the elk had charged straight into the base of the tree where he had been moments before. Deep gouges in the bark reminded Brion that he had to keep climbing. He finally reached a sturdy branch, and sat to catch his breath. He immediately started gasping for air, sensation returning to his body. Red-hot burning slowly seeped into his consciousness, and he realized his hands were rubbed raw and bleeding from his frantic climb. He found himself wishing he was back in his house, lying in bed with hot water and a fire. He looked down and realized it might be a while before that would happen. The elk was circling his tree, still looking angry. It would not be long before dark, and Brion knew that if the elk didn't finish him off, the unforgiving night would.

Brion didn't have much time to think of an escape plan, as the elk began charging at the tree again. With each hit, Brion felt the world spin, and his grip loosen. The repeated cracking noise and swaying of the tree was beginning to make him sick, both with the motion and thoughts of toppling down onto the vicious animal's antlers. His best hope was for the elk to tire and leave, but somehow he had made this one very angry at him. It backed up, eyes blazing, and tensed for another run. Brion looked around him in a daze. The branches above him were all too spindly to support his weight, but the one below him might just be strong enough. If he could climb to the edge of it, he might be able to drop to the ground undetected by the raging animal. He dropped and scrambled to catch the branch, legs kicking madly in the air. Just as he secured his grip the elk smashed into the base of the tree again. A sickening cracking noise erupted from behind Brion as he felt splinters of wood hit him. A long crack was opening up along the tree trunk, weakening his branch. He pushed himself forward as fast as

he could when suddenly the branch was no longer in his arms. He was surrounded by open empty air. He managed to turn in time to see a furry mass rapidly approaching him.

As he hit the elk, all the air escaped his lungs, and would not return. The beast roared in fury, and began bucking wildly. The more the elk thrashed, the more Brion became ensnared in it, he himself thrashing his limbs, fighting for breath. The forest pitched and turned as fur filled his mouth and nose, his body begging for air. At last, he gasped in a wonderful breath reeking of musk. He grasped the elk's fur in his hands, despite the horrid stinging sensations that ran through them as a result, and held on for all he was worth. The elk's attempts to throw Brion off were proving futile, and so it started to crane its neck backward to scrape him off with its sharp antlers. Brion twisted as best he could to avoid them, but he knew he could not continue this forever. His arms were tiring - he needed to let go. He braced for the fall, but just as he was about to release his grip, he realized he was right next to the elk's neck. Frantically, Brion let go with one hand to grab for his knife, still trying to dodge the elk's attack. This time, however, he was less successful, and the blunt force of bone hitting his shoulder made him scream in pain. With the handle finally secure in his hand, he swung it with all his remaining strength into the side of the elk's neck. The elk staggered and bleated a wet, croaking cry. As it surged forward, Brion slid off its back, still holding the handle, causing the wound to tear open wider. Brion tumbled to the ground in front of the animal as its neck began to ooze dark red liquid. He scrambled backward as quickly as he could before the elk fell with one last broken bleat.

Despite being painfully aware of the throbbing in his shoulder and various other limbs, Brion slumped to the ground before the elk in relief. It was over. He did it. He had killed the elk, and now the village could eat and be sustained for a long time. Still shaky, he sat and took the time to clean his knife as he cleared his head. Slowly, the realization dawned on him that he couldn't carry this all by himself, which finally reminded him that he hadn't seen Orla at all. It had been a while, and she must have at least heard his fight with the elk. Maybe she had been so dedicated to her position that she stayed where she was. Brion decided that this was most likely what had happened, and got up to find her. He knew he had to hurry, however. He had spilled a lot of the elk's blood, and there were plenty of other hungry creatures lurking who would gladly pick up his catch if he left it for too long. Moving as quickly as he could while trying to remain quiet, Brion made his way back to where he had first spotted the elk. As he started the jog down to where Orla would be hiding, an irregularity in the fog caught his eye. Where it should be still and thick on the ground, the fog was swirling around a furred figure. He crouched low and scooted closer for a better look, when he caught sight of something straight and long sticking up out of the figure. Reaching the side of the furry heap on the ground, he saw his arrow slowly moving up and down to the raspy breathing of Orla. She laid splayed before him, with the arrow buried deep in her stomach.

Heat spread over Brion's body, tingling under his skin, making him dizzy. His stomach gurgled and twisted, as if someone were squeezing it. When he had tried to shoot the elk, he had shot Orla, whose fur coat looked just as much

like elk as the real thing in the dense white mist. It would explain why the elk had become so enraged, if it was also fooled into thinking Brion had shot one of its own. Why did she leave her position? Perhaps to warn Brion of something. Maybe her intentions were to also shoot the elk herself. There was no way of knowing, unless he asked her himself. However, from what he could tell, she was fading very fast. He would need to carry her back to the village.

But as his hands floated above her, he hesitated. If he took her first, a bear would steal the elk away. The village desperately needed that food. Didn't they teach that the lives of many outweigh that of one? He looked down at Orla's paling face. Even if he did bring her back, there was no guarantee she would live. Many did not live from hunting accidents. Despite his internal justification, Brion still felt sick as he stood to leave Orla. He turned away, the image of his own arrow stuck deep inside her body burning in the back of his mind. He walked all the way back to the elk, where it lay untouched. Noting the darkening sky, he positioned the carcass as best he could for himself to drag it. Hoisting its front legs with his battered, aching body, Brion set off on the seemingly impossible journey home, letting the fog claim Orla's fading body.



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PASSING STRANGERS

SIR FRANCIS DASHWOOD

The receptionist, young, blonde and competent, her crisply laundered shirt tracing the contours of her body, looked up and smiled her professional smile at me. "Here is your key, Mr. Attwood. Enjoy your stay with us." A professional politeness, but could there be the promise of more?

Hotels, like train stations, are places of mystery, danger, and opportunity, places where anonymous people meet and do unknown things. Liaisons. Ships that pass in the night. There is a charged eroticism in such places that stimulates the libido and conjures fantasy.

I turned from the reception desk, bending to pick up my luggage—one shabby duffel bag—and headed for the lift. I was past tired, having flown early that morning into a wintry Heathrow from summer-kissed Jo'berg, but I was well-used to operating on little sleep. A fast trip on the Heathrow Express had brought me to Central London.

Following a much-needed shower and a shave, I set off in quest of breakfast, and that was when I bumped into Sasha. Quite literally. We collided at the door of the restaurant as she stumbled against me, sending her shoulder bag thudding to the hardwood floor.

She seemed quite content to accept my apologies for my clumsiness, and even more content to accept my invitation to join me for breakfast. Across the breakfast table, I surveyed my new companion. Mid 20s, slender and vivacious, with the lustrous raven hair, dark eyes, and olive skin of the Middle-Eastern woman, Sasha was witty, attentive, and flatteringly inquisitive. At first, I thought she might be a high-class hooker working Mayfair's expense-account hotel trade, but it soon became clear that any sexual favors she might offer later would involve no price tag.

She frowned slightly at my name. "Toby Attwood." She pronounced it carefully, with the faintest hint of an accent. I told her I was a farmer in South Africa and she responded that she had been born in Riyadh, but educated at a proper English public school, and now was a translator for an agency, en route from a conference in Cairo to her home in Alexandria (the one outside Washington, she added, when I looked puzzled). We were so different, the two of us. Male and female. Old and young. I, with my leathery sun-beaten hide; she, with a skin of silky smoothness offset by downy hairs. I, with my short red crinkled hair, now graying at the temples and receding; she, with hair long and luxuriant, gleaming and flowing like a wave crashing to the shore. But, ultimately, I sensed, we were of the same breed and, therefore, would play the game by the same rules.

Surely, though, I was at a disadvantage in our game. Flying directly into some of the tightest airport security in the world, I had been obliged to leave back home in Illovo one of the tools of my trade—my Beretta 93R. It would have made no sense to bring a sidearm, of course, as it would have never passed security but, also, complacently, I hadn't thought I'd require it on this mission. Even so, it felt odd to be without a companion that had travelled with me for the last twenty-odd years, from the scrub wars of Southern Africa, the bloody genocides

of the Balkans, through to spats and squabbles in countless tin-pot little dictatorships worldwide. There is always a need for a professional soldier. A mercenary, if you prefer. That is my trade, and I'm good at it. My name is Major Gordon Kyle—"Toby Attwood" is one of many aliases I use to disguise my global movements.

Like myself, many of my colleagues are alumni of one prestigious college or another—Sandhurst, West Point, Saint-Cyr, and that hardest of the schools of hard knocks, the Legion—and I earned my rank honestly in the Black Watch before it was folded into the Scottish Regiment. To graduate from our college, you have to learn, and then live by, one simple rule: You kill only when you need to kill, but when you need to kill, you kill.

The purpose of this trip was to be comparatively benign; my contract was to assemble a strike force - code-named by its backers, with no great imagination, Alpha Force - of a few good men for a clandestine surgical operation in the Middle East. I had known many men with guns, but few true mercenaries—men who could kill quickly and cleanly. It takes a lucky man, or a skilled man, to kill that way and, eventually, luck runs out and only the ones with skill remain. My paymaster had reluctantly agreed to finance a core team of twenty troops and, knowing that I could recruit the majority of that number in Britain, including some specialists in explosives, it was the obvious place to start.

After breakfast, Sasha and I repaired to my room, where we surveyed the bleak gloom of a British winter, until our minds and bodies turned to other, mutually pleasurable, prospects.

"You really are quite old," said Sasha, probing verbally and manually. "Late forties is all I'll admit to." I replied gruffly, as we began to nuzzle and kiss—testing each other out, savoring the possibilities, reconnoitering the terrain, in advance of the main event.

In advance of the first of the main events, to be more precise. I was sure of that now. And, all along, her questions persisted, whispered through seductive lips that brushed my ear, supported by intimate, stroking fingertips: What did I do when I was younger? Had I been to this country or that? Did I know particular people?

She was subtle, and had been briefed by well-informed superiors. And, although she filled the spaces between her questions with thought-distracting erotic sensations, I parried the questions with an artful appearance of guilelessness. My cover was strong; I'd used it before.

In the aftermath of our passion she inspected my body as we lay on the bed, marveling at the damage that it had endured over the years. The savage crescent of scar tissue on my shoulder inflicted one night by a Congolese rebel whom I'd been careless enough to let approach with a tapanga hidden behind his back. The neat little star on my forearm where I had been kissed by a single 7.62 mm shell fired by an AK-47-wielding Serbian freedom-fighter. The ugly slash on my thigh, still red despite the passage of time, that was down to a white-hot piece of shrapnel from a grenade lobbed by a beardless boy in Libya. With that lapse of judgment, I'd realized that my mercenary days were drawing to a close. Even as I had taken up first pressure on the Beretta's trigger and then had neutralized the threat of a second grenade, I had felt the sand shift beneath me. I had felt an unfamiliar acrid wash of regret at my action—skill was faltering and luck was no substitute. I had told myself that leadership of this new strike force would be

my final command. Then it truly would be a goodbye to suburban living and the start of a horse farm in rural South Africa.

Sasha's inspection (and her compilation of evidence) over, she stretched and arched her body sensuously and then padded off to the shower, inviting me to join her in the suds. Pleading senility and fatigue, I demurred, pulling the sheet over myself and turning away. I heard the squeal of the faucet in the bathroom, the hiss of the spray, the splash of the water against her skin. Keenly imagined the surfaces I had so recently enjoyed, gleaming, wet, and slippery.

But I now had things to do. My deflection of Sasha's questions had been competent, but there could be no disguising the evidence of battle wounds and violence from even a casual eye, and I was already sure that Sasha was well-versed in detecting the aftermath of violence. Rising silently from the bed, I moved over to her shoulder bag, which was hanging carelessly from a chair. A brief inspection confirmed my suspicions. Opening the bag, under the typical woman's kit I found a modest Smith and Wesson nestled at the very bottom. It was a female's firearm—almost a toy—and hardly professional, but still professional enough to execute a jet-lagged male, lying in a bed and drained of testosterone. And she'd been professional enough to take the trouble to ensure that her target really wasn't some hapless boer named Toby Attwood.

But her errors defeated her subterfuge. The false stumble in the breakfast room had been unconvincing—balance is instinctive and its lack is difficult to fake. And then there was the suspiciously heavy thud caused by the modest Smith and Wesson as the shoulder bag fell to the hardwood floor. The faint hesitation on hearing my name. The too-insistent questions.

Yes, Sasha and I were of the same breed, and we played the game by the same rules, but her skill was inferior to mine and her luck had run out. Not because I possessed superb deductive powers but because my Lebanese paymaster had advised me just before my flight that my mission may have been compromised, and that an effort to eradicate me by our opponents was possible.

I confirmed that the pistol was loaded and picked up a pillow from the bed. The warmth from the bathroom heater, the scent of the soap, the splashing of the spray led me to Sasha. In the bright light she turned, blinking, to greet me, vital and invigorated, the upper surfaces of her breasts glistening and fresh, the curve of her thighs tempting, beads of water coursing down the flatness of her stomach to the V-shaped darkness beneath. For a moment she smiled a welcome—I think sincerely—but then her eyes widened in disbelief as she took in the evil of the gun that I had leveled towards her, the pillow to muffle the report, and the hardness of my look. In realization of what must come, Sasha stumbled backwards—this time a genuine stumble—but there was nowhere for her to go. We were of the same breed and we played by the same rules. You kill only when you need to kill, but when you need to kill, you kill. Just as she would have shot me in a few minutes time, so I shot her then, once through the heart and once through the head. No longer attractive, with her hair flowing with blood, Sasha's body slid down until it lay crumpled on the floor of the shower.

I turned off the shower and got dressed. Half an hour later, Mr. Toby Attwood strolled out of the hotel, carrying one shabby duffel bag, and disappeared forever into the London crowds. Major Gordon Kyle had a mission to complete...

DAYTIME SLEEPWALKING

SHAUN TERRY

I lumbered
From long, sweet slumber;
Lain lackadaisically,
Carelessly
Unaware,
Staring at stars not there,
Lazily;
In phase with the buzzing
Of ruminants.
Impatience keeps
The spinning
Of soft-spun tapestries,
Like lights
From LED displays
Informing me.
Boringly, snoringly,
Abhorrently
Screaming
In the ether,
Ever wide-eyed dreaming.
Slack-jawed slapstick,
Last-ditch
Fiending,
First-step graduates,
Immaculate scheming;
Themes of think-thrifting,
Grifting,
Unbelieving.
But cheeks touch ears,
Creeps tuck fears
Between lines

Like cold crimes
Kept in light
For unawares.
Save me, sweet savior.
I savor what is spared;
Hollow saccharine,
Packed aptly
For impaired.
Nourishment
Administered
For fending off
Despair.
Who's there but us
For a whimpered
Manifesto?
It's blessed by bold,
Bite-sized bumpkins.
How they
Bend low
To listen for a sign,
Through plastic kitchen ware.
They observe
The unobservable;
The rest they pitch and pare.
But if you look
Into the water,
Close enough,
What they're fearing
Is staring back at you,
If we're the crew,
Then who's steering?

QUIET GIRL

VICTORIA FONG

Never shall I show my feelings,
positive I must be.

Never shall I cry before them,
smiles are what they'll see.

No one knows the pain I feel,
nor shall they ever know.

All they'll see is a quiet girl,
I won't open up to their blows.



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LOVE

CHRISTINA BOYD

All black on
Fish nets
Red pumps
A stack to blow
Flips and splits
Silver poles and tricks
Hanging from ceilings
Surfing on Candy's hips
Best drinks VIP has to offer
Straw to my sexy lips - I sip
Ratchet music banging
Takes our mind on a trip
Role playing
Cause we like playing
We don't need a script
I be Kisha
You be Tyrone
Tree blowing
We are loudly in a zone
Where we end up
Only us and whoever rides along will know
When we coming back
Not until the night is gone

DROWNING IN SORROW

VICTORIA FONG

My stress is high,
my emotions low.
I am running on faith alone.
No one cares,
they never did.
I am alone in this dreary world we live in.
My emotions are going down,
twirling in the sink I fear,
by the cold knife that I hold to the skin that I hold dear.
The stars grow dull
and the world is fading,
for all my emotions I am draining
from my body,
into the Earth,
so those people I've hurt can forget my birth.
I was never here,
I've never seen your face.
I've only existed in the cold, dark space
of imagination,
or wonder, or thought,
but never once have I touched your heart.



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I came into the world with no idea of what to expect. If I'd had a clue, I may have chosen a different path, or not come at all. I started as a baby like all others at first, and then life happened. I saw things, heard them too. I do not know if they are in my head, or outside. The people do not know what they are doing to me, and I do not know why. Voices inside and outside my head are all talking at once. They drive me crazy with their chatter. I think that, maybe, insanity will be a great escape from the wounds inflicted on my mind and my soul. I get so lost in the name-calling, plus the visions. The visions of wanting to deliver what was given to me so many times.

I am wounded, and the world has made me into damaged goods. No one wants damaged goods. They say, "Only the best will do. Anything else has to go." I wear the smile to hide the pain. I pull on the mask to hide the scars. Which is worse? The pain that eats away at my mind, or the scars that bleed the life from me? I stand here afflicted by everyone, and hate how few care to know. I hate to not know what I want to know, and to know what I do not want to know.

There were many points in life that I wanted to die, but could not go through with it. Many times I could have died, but it never happened. I asked, "Why am I alive?" I'm tormented by voices and thoughts. Something dictates my every move and thought, like a puppet on strings. Is insanity an escape, or just another prison to be tortured by? Should the grave be a way out, or into the hell I've tried to escape from? Pain is all I know - all that I've been given. More hurt than pleasure I have received from the world. Some like to feel pain, while others like to deliver it. I want to feel nothing, for I am nothing like everybody else.

Someone said, "Anger and agony are better than misery." But they all hurt, so why have any of them? I hate it, the feeling of pain, and the emotions that come with it. I hate the scars that I wear, inside and out. I'm lucky to live, while others are blessed to die. I am told scars are good to have, to show one's strength through past battles. Being born is the great miracle of life, and life is a gift from God. The choice to live, and the journey that goes with that choice, are up to the one who made it. God - for some unknown reason - blessed us with free will. What is free will? Are you not free to die, rather than live? That makes it a curse instead, if you cannot make your own decision about living.

There is one life to live, in pain or joy. You live it no matter what. Life is the greatest gift, second only to love. But the best thing about gifts is that you can give them away. I am wounded and alive, but not living. The only questions to answer, too often asked, are these: "Why bother with existence if you're not living? Why live if you are not alive anyway?" I've asked them many times before, and have reached one unbelievable truth: There is no answer. So should we... should I live with the pain, with the hate, with the rage that is building up inside? Or be taken by the darkness, and consumed by the everlasting fire? Speak now - what say you?

APARTMENT 7E

CHRISTINA BOYD

The feeling was overwhelming, as my heart was filled with joy and love. I hugged every homeless person I fed and clothed today. The hands that I shook and the smiles I exchanged gave me flashbacks of memories that I thought were long forgotten. I so enjoyed being around people that were happy that I was there with them. It brought back a familiar warmth that I had not felt in a long time. This feeling reminded me of a friendship that I watched flourish as a child. As a child, I was unaware of the impact that this friendship would have on my life, but today is the day it all came together. Today, I realized why I have always loved helping and giving to those less fortunate. Today, I realized why I love the word "friendship."

It was a typical hot day in the summer of 1984, as I jumped double-dutch outside with my friends. I had been awaiting my turn for what felt like all day, because people didn't often want to partner with me. I guess I couldn't blame them, when my pigeon toes would step on the rope every time. Being that I could turn good, the partner that would pick me would overlook my feet in hopes of the best. I entered the ropes and starting jumping, thinking, "Today is the day my feet won't fail me." Just as I made it to the 70 count, which I hardly ever make, I saw my mother walking up the block towards our building with a man. I stepped on the rope at count 93; I had almost made it to 101, which was the number of steps to beat.

It was the first day I met my mother's new friend, Richie. Richie was a white man who stood about 5'5". He had blonde hair that he wore slicked back to match his sleek black suit, a white button-up shirt, and black, hard-bottom dress shoes. The only thing relaxed about him was the top button of his shirt, which he left unbuttoned. All the people on my block stared at them as they approached me. The looks could have been for so many reasons, such as my mother was black and Richie was white, the suit he had on in the dead heat of the summer, or because he walked and held his hands funny. The strangest thing that I remember from that day was that, though I was embarrassed, the confidence in my mother's stride as she approached me was enough for the both of them, as well as enough for no one to outwardly laugh, even if they wanted to.

My mother was introduced to Richie at a barbershop called "Toby's", where they both hung out. I smile as my mind reminds me of the antiseptic and oil sheen spray smell that Toby finished every haircut with. I think Toby had a thing for my mom, because he always gave me candy or a dollar when I saw him. The thought of her meeting Richie there was unusual to me, because Toby's was a black establishment, and oddly enough, she never witnessed Richie getting a haircut, though his hair was always neatly cut. Richie and Toby seem to be friends, and the barbershop was their hangout. I was amazed at how well Richie was treated when I was around. It was as if no one saw his disorder, not even himself. It was the first time many of us had ever interacted with someone with "cerebral palsy," and none of us knew what it was called back then. Actually, my mother didn't care what it was, or what it was called. All she cared about was that

Richie had become her new best friend.

I can remember my mother in the living room, singing and dancing, while Richie tried to dance a duet with her. They would laugh together, and my mother would try not to out-dance him, but she never compromised her singing. Singing was from her heart, and her heart was full of love for him, so she always made sure he felt it in every way she could show him. She loved him in every way she could, by dancing, singing, and cooking all his favorite dishes. Richie adored my mother, and she knew it, though he never pursued her as a potential boyfriend. He loved her in a way that swore to protect her, and give her the world if he could. I believe that my mother needed him just as much as he needed her, and every friend that visited apartment 7E knew it. Everybody that visited my home loved Richie; maybe not the way my mother did, but the unspoken agreement was, "No entrance without acceptance." So everybody accepted him.

As I look back now, to think that Richie was only a part of our lives for a summer just doesn't seem possible, because of the impact that he made on my life. I always wondered what happened to him, because he just stopped coming around. The way my mother cared for him, I know she would not have just written him off. Every moment my mother had, she used by walking to Mott Ave. to see if Richie had showed up, but Toby hadn't seen him either. No one knew where Richie lived, so all we could do was wait for him to appear.

As tears began to roll down these cheeks that were just carrying my smile, and goose bumps began to hug my skin, I realized that I had really never seen him again. How could this be? Somehow, I have managed to carry him with me as if he was physically still around. It's as if I never accepted that he was gone, and the heaviness that I felt in my stomach sent me running to the bathroom. Embracing the porcelain with my bottom, I rocked back and forth, struggling to get my nine year-old self together. I cried, feeling as if a piece of my childhood had just died. Then, I saw Richie's face as he smiled through his disability. I explained to my nine-year old self how I have become a humanitarian because of him, and all three of us hugged.

I would rather have known Richie for a moment in time that impacted my whole life than a forever full memories that I may have taken for granted. In some ways, maybe the mystery of him disappearing had ingrained his existence in my mind, and his unique friendship with my mother had become a constant reminder of his and my mother's strength. I think I subconsciously search for love of this magnitude, and wish for friendships this strong with everyone I encounter. I believe that, as humans, the only responsibility we have is to love everyone and everything, and in return the creator of the unknown will let us breathe its air and eat its food.

HEALED

BERNARD LILES

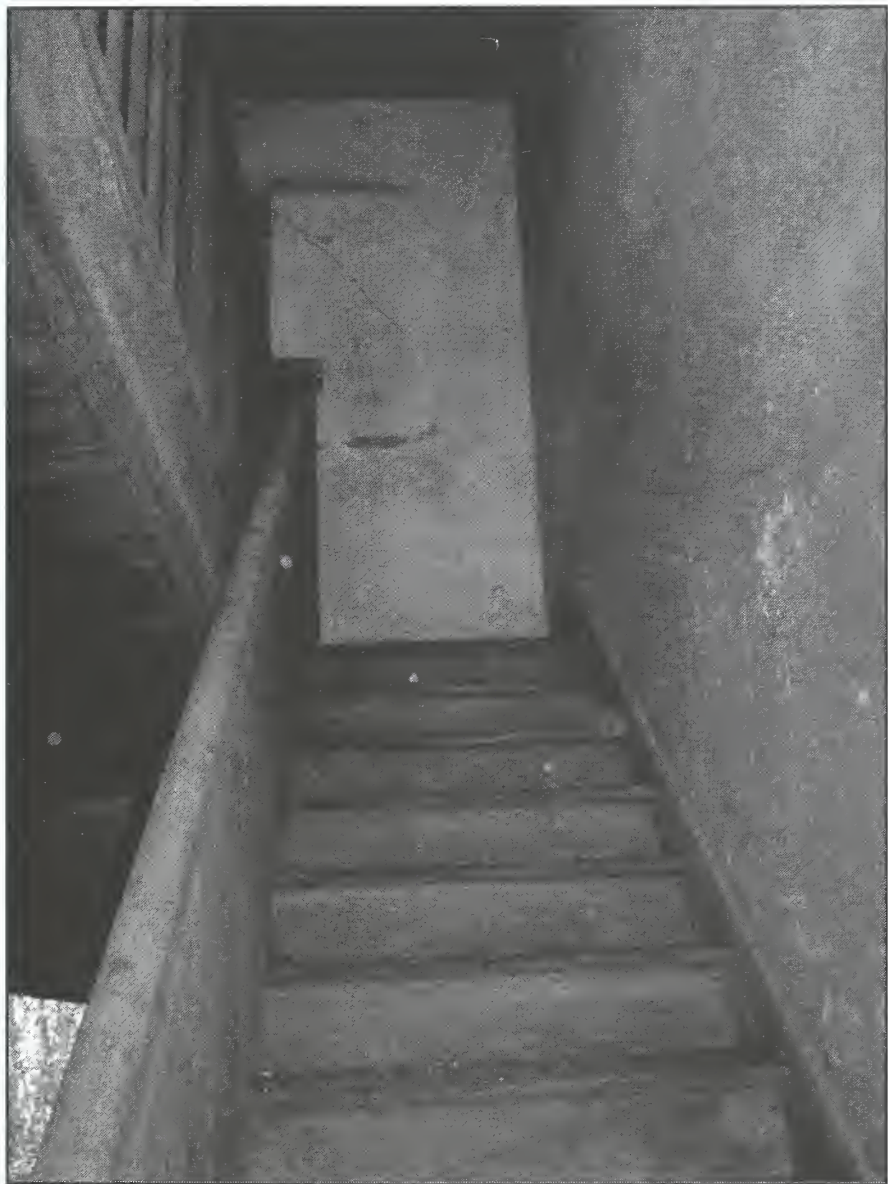
I was broken; now I am fixed. I was wounded; now I am healed. I was dying; now I am living. I have found a reason to be, a reason to stay. I found the love and peace I was looking for in my life. I will try new things to make me feel life is worth living. I love life, and the people in it. I am still battling the thoughts and voices that may never go away, nor leave me a moment's peace. I don't like it, but I have to accept the hand I was dealt. I do not like these voices, but we are forced to live together, for God knows how long. I've made a lot of wishes. I really wished they would leave me in peace; that they would leave forever. But they may never go away, for they follow like a black cloud that hangs overhead, bringing misery wherever it goes.

I am on a ship that is sailing the stormy seas of life. The waves toss me to and fro, but I will endure the storm. I must endure, for I am strong, and am getting that much stronger, as is the storm. I can withstand the chaos, because I am a fighter. I am made tough by the trials of life, and her lessons give me wisdom to survive the next test. I walked this road alone, only to find I was never alone in the fight, for he is with me unseen. I went through multitudes of battles, and have scars that I wear as badges of honor. The stripes give me courage for what I can overcome. I walk healed by the stripes he wears, and saved by his blood.

There are many more battles for me to win. The war is not over until I am gone. Then, someone else will take up the sword, until he gains the final victory. I am getting better from the last fight, and I will continue to improve as I go on. I know that the scars will go away, and that is okay. I am fine with showing my war wounds off, now. Someone once said, "My scars remind me that the past is real..." I know that the past is real, and there is no escaping that truth.

I want to live again, to realize I am alive. To realize that to live, I must focus on life, and just let go. I should let go of the pain, for it will only bring more. I should let go of the hatred - it will only destroy me in the end. I should let go of the past - it has little value to me anyway. I would love to see a better future, and not be held back by the past. I want a future without the voices and thoughts, and everything else. I wish that were possible, but it isn't.

So I shall continue to bear my cross, like he carries his. Why I was given these voices, and what they are here to do, doesn't matter. What does matter is what I do now that I have them. I choose to continue to resist, and keep fighting on until the battle is won. This I know for sure, for I am an overcomer, and I will win this war! For he overtook the grave; I will beat them. Who's with me on this now!



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THE PLACE WHERE YOU ARE

SHAUN TERRY

Soaking in the softness of her azure irises;
a pale, pleasant morning
before a torment of questions and born-hollow doubts.

Pedestrians pass her by and smile:
their eyes
manipulated by the weight of her
gentle, lovetrap face,
supine to subtle, incidental seduction
in long, limber, elegant limbs.

And boys and men
and girls and women
try to find some bit of something
to say,
hoping that she'll
look on them
with something
more than pity.

But they don't
see her;
they see what they want
her to be.

They don't see around
rounded corners' creases in big blue eyes,
calling for
the kind of conversation
or homily or footnote or patterns in pavement or jester's song
that leads to
fountains of forgiveness
and forever-forgiveness

and open hands
and open hearts, ready-made
for placing her just so;
she's wavering,
blind to tricks and traps,
fighting to find space where she can just
breathe:
her tender, ripened, crimson mouth,
reaching to pull in air
that grows a her that is hers, alone.

They don't know her eager ambitions,
they don't know her fears and revelations;
too dumbstruck
by beauty and benevolence
to realize that
she's already all there.
She has all that she needs.

From what corner of this place did you
find me?
Who held your hand when you were four,
and who wiped away tears
when your universe was unkind?

I am each person here, and I am not them.
I own their motivations and weaknesses,
but I see filaments and fragments
of what they mostly miss.

I want to smooth a path so soft
that you might find
yourself free from suffering.

NIGHT TRAIN TO NORTH DAKOTA

CHRISTIAN GUNN

His story takes place in Wisconsin,
The capital Madison.
It is Wisconsin cold.
The young man's name is Jack Madison Miller

He graduated high school.
He was named after his father.
He his father's name is Jack Madison Miller Sr.
He learned how to be the best sorcerer.
He is poisoned by his cousin.
He dies at the age of thirty five.

The board of sorcerers
They decided to strip Jack's powers..
He decided to poison
His sister in law and
lock her up in a big box.

At age sixteen
he went to live with his Uncle Snow.
When he was eighteen
He could train to be a sorcerer.
Uncle Snow told Jack
that he comes
from a long line of sorcerers.

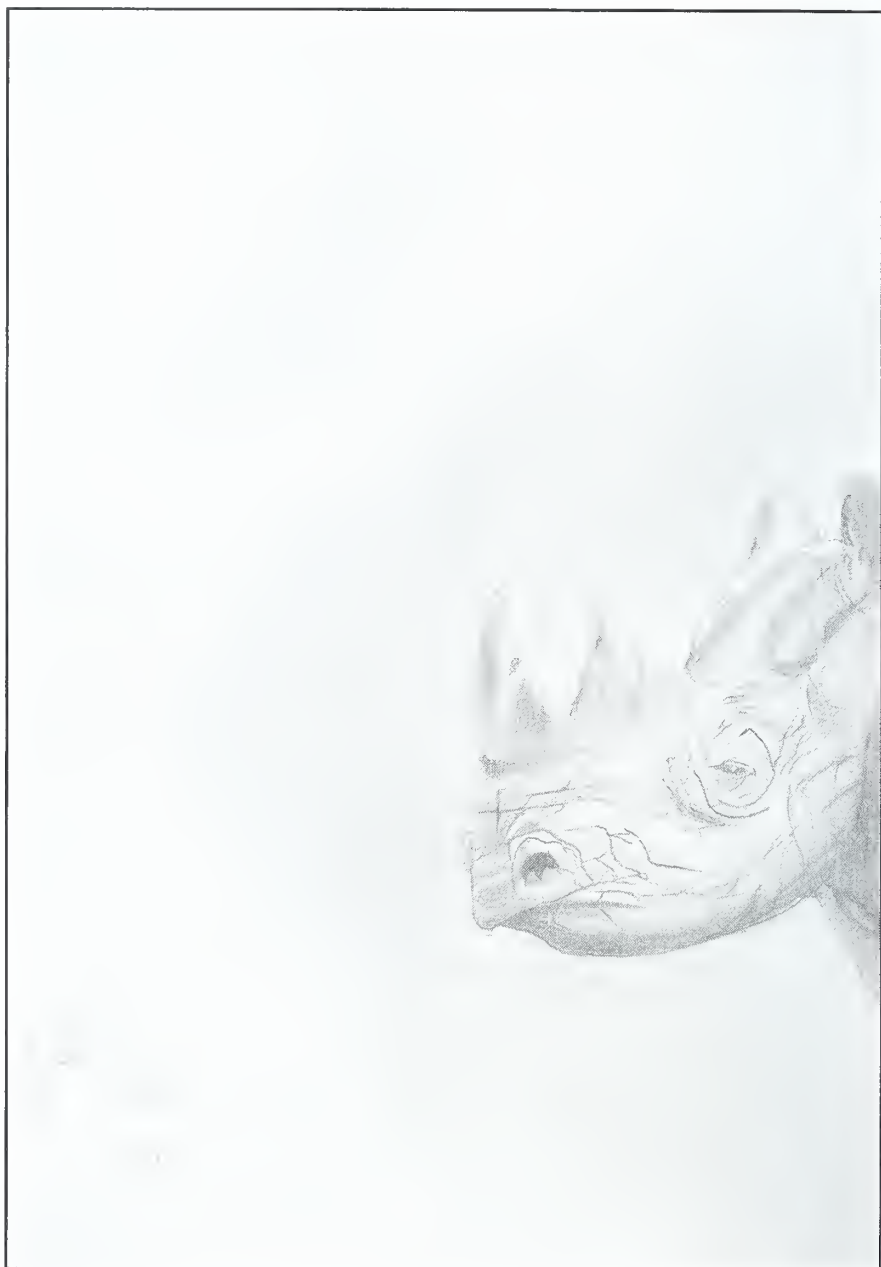
Uncle Snow hid the books and
bought his ticket.
Jack, you should leave on the first train,
Uncle Snow said. *It is not safe here.*
for a young sorcerer like you.

You are the last sorcerer in the world.
Uncle Snow said, when you get to your
destination you will
meet a lady in a red and black dress.
She's an old friend.
Her name is Lisa.
Lisa is your train.
You will live with Lisa and her daughter.
Jack moved to North Dakota.
He took the night train.

KEEP HOLDING ON

VICTORIA FONG

Like the leaves in fall I am dying,
I don't wish to die so I am trying
to hold onto the life I've held so dear
and to live every moment as it might be my last I fear.
I can feel my heart pounding against my chest,
begging me to give up so I can rest,
but I'll keep fighting till my dying breath,
as I don't wish to meet the shadow named Death...
Not yet.
The sun seems brighter and the air smells sweet,
I don't wish to leave the planet under my feet.
My disease is thriving while I am dying,
yet my mind is continually striving
to conquer the beast inside of me,
and to let me live to just be me.



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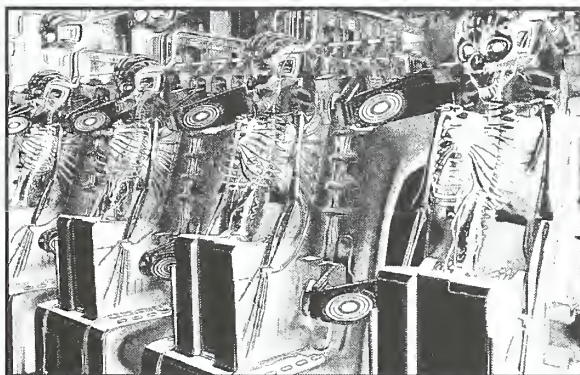
I am the light of the world that shines on everyone. I give warmth to all that come near. My rays beam all throughout the universe. I am the symbol of hope; no I am the hope that creation needs to save itself from destruction. All who come to me shall find rest, and eternal peace that will keep them calm in the chaos. I am the life that never ends for those who are in me. They will never die, nor grow old. They will be reborn into a new creature that is beautiful and radiant.

I am the one that breaks the power of sin and darkness. No force can overtake me, nor resist my infinite might. I am the shelter for all to come to for protection from the storm. I am the great liberator, who frees anyone who desires it, and who chooses me. I am the father that corrects all wrongs, and mother that nourishes the hungry. All who need sustenance, come to me. I am the way that all should follow. On my path, they shall never be harmed or led astray, nor fall into path of ruin. I am the one who asks every evildoer to turn away from their wicked ways, and come to me for direction.

I am the greatest physician, who can mend a broken heart, heal a crushed spirit, and fix a damaged mind or body. All they need do is ask, and walk with me, so that they never face trouble again. I am the mighty warrior that fights the battles for my beloved children. With my battle axe, I cut down those who would harm my family. With my shield, I guard them from the fiery arrows. No danger shall come to those who choose me. I rule with justice and truth, and what I do is right. There is no fault in me, or my ways.

So I ask - my only request is - for all sinners to stop their transgression, and turn toward me, and follow my commands. They are not hard, and shall bring everyone peace with their brothers and sisters, and understanding in relationship. I am the one who gives wisdom to those who seek it, and understanding to those who want it.

What say you? Which path is it - the path of destruction, or the way of life?



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COMPETITION

KHALIF RUEBIN

Sometimes I feel like someone sees me as a target or threat; I will make a bet, no matter if somebody beat or I was met with defeat; some of us tried to do better as a person, to win while our opponent trained. Some of us blame others, not ourselves for why we lose; instead, go back and train, get better; it's time to wake up, keep training; nobody will not know until you win. Competition. Improvement shows as a person grows; don't worry if somebody targets you or tried to threaten you. If you're called out, take the challenge.

WAKE UP

KHALIF RUEBIN

There is a man in this world who do not care if you are rich or poor; he wants to take you out of this earth; he thinks because he's wealthy he is God; one day his kind will be stopped if we come together and fight. This man is racist; he wants to control the population and make everyone his puppet; we don't have to live this way; if a generation keeps growing and opening their minds but they don't know about this man; nobody knows except the most important people who are famous, so wake up. Forget about your problem. We don't know his name or how he looks. We haven't seen him in person trying to control me and you. He shall be stopped.



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A breeze stirred over the damp, densely foliated steppes of the Wilds, ruffling the moisture-laden cloak of the rider. His mount tossed its head, whickering softly at the welcome touch of wind, and the rider patted his neck affectionately, welcoming the breeze himself. It was warm here, on top of the ridge where the sun could still touch the land. Airborne moisture rose constantly in humid waves from the ravines and river valleys below, where the morning dew never seemed to melt, and which were forever laden in mists and river spray no matter the time of day.

The few travelers who dared wander this region found it eerie, and avoided the valleys as much as possible. Many claimed that dangerous Other-folk and monsters out of legend haunted such places, and few enough explorers had dared test such rumors that they were still considered authoritative. The path the rider led his mount along followed the ridgeline as closely as possible, though it could hardly be considered a path. Already, the rider had followed along several of the valley floors, which were easier to navigate than the trail which crested the ridges, and even forded several streams.

Though if he were honest with himself, he had done so most often out of a desire, part instinct, part precaution, to stay out of sight as he traversed these no-man's lands.

The rider's hand went self-consciously to the brooch that pinned his grey, travel-stained cloak to his left shoulder, a finely-worked silver arrow set within a drawn silver bow. He had erased all other signs of his identity from his person and his belongings, but had barely hesitated to don this one reminder. He had worked too long and too hard to easily surrender bearing it openly, though there were those in the lands he had left behind who might try to kill him for it, if they knew what it meant.

Just as well, he thought to himself, as he maneuvered his mount around a bend in the ridge, that there was no one here to wonder what the brooch meant. He had not seen anyone since entering the Wilds, nor even any sign of anyone, even on the road. His utter solitude as he continued his journey had finally convinced him that the ridgeline track was the fastest route to his destination. And, above all, he had need for speed, greater even than his need for secrecy.

The rider's leather-gloved hand strayed towards his saddle-bags, to one pouch in particular, before he schooled them to stillness. The object he was safeguarding was exactly where he had left it, as secure as it had been since he last had checked its wrappings and fastenings early that morning, before breaking camp. Fondling it wouldn't make it any safer, and would mark it for any watchers intent on banditry.

Even so, his hand moved instead to the hilt of his sword on his left hip, easing it in its sheath, as he had done a dozen times since moving back onto the ridge. His charge would only remain as safe as he kept it, and being in the open did not make him feel safe at all.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon in the west, to the rider's right as

he traveled south, but it was an hour short of sunset yet. The ridge and those like it across the intervening valleys were brightly lit, although the valleys themselves remained in deep twilight, and the mists billowed and rose among the dense thickets below as the breeze continued. Ahead, the path began to climb upward among a series of rocky outcroppings and boulders, and the trail weaved out of sight around them, a sheer fall off to the left and into the ravine below. Judging from how twilight shadows clung to the granite formations, the ridge ahead would steepen rapidly, placing the path in shadow where the ridge blocked the sun. Mist already clung to the path where the shadows lay thickest, and the coolness would be a welcome change from...

The rider reined his horse in suddenly, frowning and gazing sharply at the path ahead. It was too early in the evening for the mists to have covered the ridge ahead, and yet they did, persisting in spite of the sun and the breeze. Even as he watched, the part of the path that curved out of sight below the outcroppings disappeared from view behind a billow of thick white fog which rose from the valley below.

The rider's frown considered the thickening wall of mist which was slowly enveloping the ridge before him. He had been told before coming here that the mists could be uncanny, especially in the valleys, but this was... unnatural.

Then he turned his head to look back up the path behind him, and the hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood on end.

The path behind him was covered in fog as well, a thick, billowing cloud which prevented him from seeing even as far as the bend he had just turned around, barely a hundred paces back by his best estimation. And as he glanced down the slopes of the ridge to either side of him, he saw that similar walls of mist were marching up the slopes towards him, hedging him in on each side. One wall moved with the wind, while the other... didn't. As it was, only about a hundred paces of open space lay around him, centered on him and the ridge he occupied.

It wasn't natural. None of it was.

Then his horse stiffened beneath him, lifting its head with ears straight up, and he knew he was in danger.

Instantly, he emptied his mind of fear, reached out with his spirit for something beyond himself. And the Knowing came. And with that knowledge, his fear was renewed ten-fold.

To go forwards on the path meant death. The brunt of the ambush awaited him on the slopes of the ridge ahead, hidden among the rocks. To turn back was also perilous, for a rearguard had been established behind him, lest he escape the attack which waited on the ridge. Both parties were hidden by mist, but he Knew they were there, whoever they were.

He also Knew that they were not bandits, or even the Sworn of some lord who had set his men to privateering in the Wilds, though surely no sane lord would do so. These hunters, for hunters they were, sought what he carried, what he had been charged to protect with his life and all his power. What had been kept secret from all but those few who had sent him.

He was betrayed.

Desperately, he reined his horse to the right and charged down the slope,

towards the ominous wall of mist. To turn left would have meant exposing himself to a downhill assault from the ridge ahead, and he had no other choices. His charge must be protected, and so he must survive. And survival meant running, running fast and hard, beyond the reach of the nets he could sense spread all around the ridge he had just been on. He would meet enemies in the thickets and valleys below – he could sense them, awaiting orders to advance from whoever led them – but not so many in the valley as on the ridge itself.

He drew his saber as his horse plunged into the wall of fog.

Had his mount been trained less by an hour, or trusted him less by a hair, he knew it could never have made this reckless plunge down the mountain-side without falling, breaking a leg, throwing him, or unseating him beneath a low-lying limb. But his horse did. Sereth had been foaled and trained on the plains of Averon, and raised in the famed stables of the Horse-King. The stallion was strong, hardy, and intelligent, and loved his master more than his own life. Where his rider died, Sereth would die.

His rider prayed he wouldn't have to as they careened down the slope, his breath coming in near-gasps as he frantically sawed at the reins to guide Sereth around the trunks of the trees and bushes that loomed suddenly out of the mist upon the slopes below. His breath caught as the stallion sailed lightly over a fallen log, stumbling slightly down the slope as he alighted. The fog was now so thick as to reduce visibility to no more than twenty feet around them, and they were now deep enough in the valley that the sun was hidden behind the next ridge, plunging the slopes into an eerie, unnatural twilight. Ahead of them, the sound of a swift-moving stream grew louder with each galloping stride Sereth took.

Slowly, the ground leveled out. They had reached the bottom of the valley. The river the rider had heard from above rushed swiftly along the valley floor amidst boulders and thickets of aspen, birch, rhododendron, and spruce. He turned Sereth quickly downstream to the left, toward his destination and, he hoped, a way out of the valley system, and out of the ambush that loomed above.

And through the ambush that awaited here below, and whose nature he still did not know.

He didn't have to travel long to find out.

A Knowing came to him almost too late, and he ducked his head to Sereth's neck – just in time to avoid a well-placed dark-colored wire, strung between two trees at just the right height to pull a rider off his horse. As his Knowing guided him, he turned Sereth doggedly through gaps in an ever-widening maze of wire-traps, nooses, and pit-traps, some of them meant to unhorse him, others meant to maim Sereth, and still others meant to kill him and Sereth both.

In a matter of seconds, he was through them all, saved by his Knowing and by Sereth's trust. Through the traps, and into those who had laid them.

Barking calls in a harsh language suddenly arose all around them as they navigated the last layer of cleverly-strung wires, and twanging sounds resounded off the valley's slopes as cross-bow bolts began to fill the air. Lithe, dark shapes appeared from around the trees or in the branches themselves, raining bolts down in a shower that caught only wind as Sereth shot forward through the attacker's ranks, his rider's heavy war saber gleaming brightly as he hewed the dark-skinned assailants in their path. In moments, they were through and riding

hard into the depths of the valley ahead, the rider's sword stained with black blood.

Svartalfar, the rider thought grimly as Sereth plunged onward into the deepening twilight. *Armed with Ramrithirian cross-bows. There will be blood to pay, if we live this day.*

Suddenly, wolf-howls filled the bowl of the valley all around them, startling the rider upright in his saddle. Sereth bawled with terror, and surged forward as his rider flung an arm around his neck to remain astride. The eerie howls filled the air around them, seeming to ride the wind itself.

After barely ten galloping strides, however, Sereth stopped dead, rearing back on his hind legs and screaming loudly with fear. His rider looked ahead of them, and felt his own heart freeze.

Three wolf-shapes stood ahead of them in the valley, not twenty paces from Sereth. The size of large dogs, any one of them big enough to bring down a horse, they advanced, menacing both horse and rider. Their bodies were... translucent, and insubstantial. The trees behind them were visible through them, their bodies seemingly made part of mist, part of an invisible matter that rippled like water when they moved, for all the world giving the impression of fur rippling in the growing wind.

But for all their insubstantiality, those eyes, glowing a baleful icy blue, were real, as were those teeth, long and dagger-sharp, gleaming like ice. Those growls, like ice cracking in the Mountains of Storm in mid-winter, froze the breath in the man's chest. As they advanced, they seemed to leer at their prey, rejoicing in their clear victory.

Wind-wolves, the part of the man's brain that was still thinking forced out. *Light help us, they sent wind-wolves...*

The lead wolf leaped, and the rider wheeled his terrified mount to the side to slash at the attacking monster as it fell through the air towards them, whispering one last prayer to the Creator.

The creature's body melted away into the air as the saber passed harmlessly through him, his eyes and teeth still leering mockingly across the man's field of vision as he disappeared into a gust of icy wind. The sudden blast whirled icy dust into the man's face, chilling him. As he looked on, the other two wolves leaped into the air, each disappearing into a swirling cloud of icy wind with a leer of its own.

They would run down their prey, those leers promised, but not until they had enjoyed the hunt.

An icy fist around the man's heart, with the shouts of the *Svartalfar* behind and the howls of the wind-wolf pack ahead, the rider urged his terrified mount onward. And slowly, as he whispered encouragement, Sereth gathered himself to run again. Even now, the stallion trusted him. They could not give up.

But how long can we last? That question haunted the man as he and his mount galloped onward into the deepening twilight.

The hunt had only just begun.

SECOND HEART

OLIVIA SIMPSON

Her second heart lay buried in the field.

Untilled earth, virginity intact.

Along the periphery:

sheets hung by her grandmother's hands.

Pinned in place, the ivory fabric moved skittishly.

A line of anxious brides,

wedding dresses cloaking skeletal forms

as the metal of the clothespins winked in and out,

the reflection of borrowed light, children's smiles in the dark.

She had buried the treasures of her childhood with the heart.

A contingency plan.

Beneath the ground a second chance studded with baby teeth

and imprisoned in a lattice of antlers.

An improvised ribcage to protect the muscle of her redemption.

She had replaced the crumpled pile of soil

just as the gaping mouth of the horizon swallowed the sun.

Her linen shirt cuffs stained with secrecy

she had secured her mask over her empty face.

And resisted the urge to feel her pulse.

To reach for the sound, the feel of her existence.

Now buried in the ground.

SCORCH

KIRA FREUDENRICH

My father was flint. My mother was pyrite. I was born - a small, dim flame - used to light the dark shop that the owner was sleepily preparing to open. I sat in my lamp, hungrily feeding on the oil in the bottom.

I would not stay here long. I had already determined that. So many of my kind are born every day, but die passively soon after creation. I would live; I would grow. I was ready. Using the energy I gained from the oil, I push at the sides of the lamp until it gives, and I tumble out.

It's almost impossible to stop a flame once it gets going, and absolutely impossible to stop a flame with a will to live. The man in the store stomps and bats at me in a desperate attempt to kill me. At last, he goes for a pail of water, but by the time he reaches it, I have become too big for a pail of water to extinguish me.

I leave the shop. I jump and leap and dance as I spread through the narrow streets. The houses are not protected, and fall first. The temple never stood a chance. Then, I see a big, oval-shaped building. I am overcome with curiosity, and go to explore it. Not much exploring is done before that big, magnificent building, too, is engulfed in flames.

I have covered much of the city. It was time. I could feel myself getting stronger. Soon enough, I'd be born into the outside world. In a few minutes, I emerged: a fully-shaped body, ready to explore. From the seven hills, I gaze at the town I destroyed. The buildings were huge, very civilized, and far ahead of their time. It's a shame that the city is in ruins, but it can be rebuilt. I find I really don't care. I turn and follow the river in search of another city to consume with my flames.

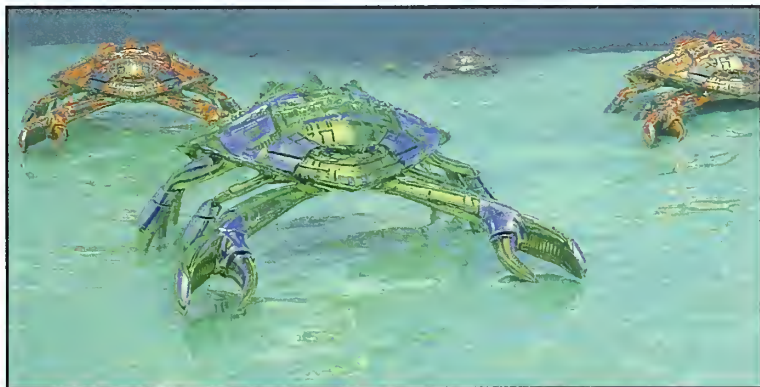


"Sight" Copyright © 2015 Britney Balmer

FIGHT FREE FROM SIRENS

SHAUN TERRY

Polaris in her eyes,
a mouth full of sin,
encumberingly marble-esque architecture.
She was baptized in chicken grease and guitar strings,
and she can't tell what time it is.
She'll talk about church,
and she'll talk about heaven,
but ask her what the future holds, and she'll spit at you for sinning.
She teaches how to sit,
and she's read a thousand books,
but she can't tell you how to read her thoughts.
She's a small, scared dog,
cowering beneath a coffee table,
but ask her how she feels,
and she'll bare her teeth and growl.
Her big-eyed, tear-filled smile will suck you in,
and her dance will keep you around,
but ask enough questions,
don't keep her distracted,
and those teeth will push you off.



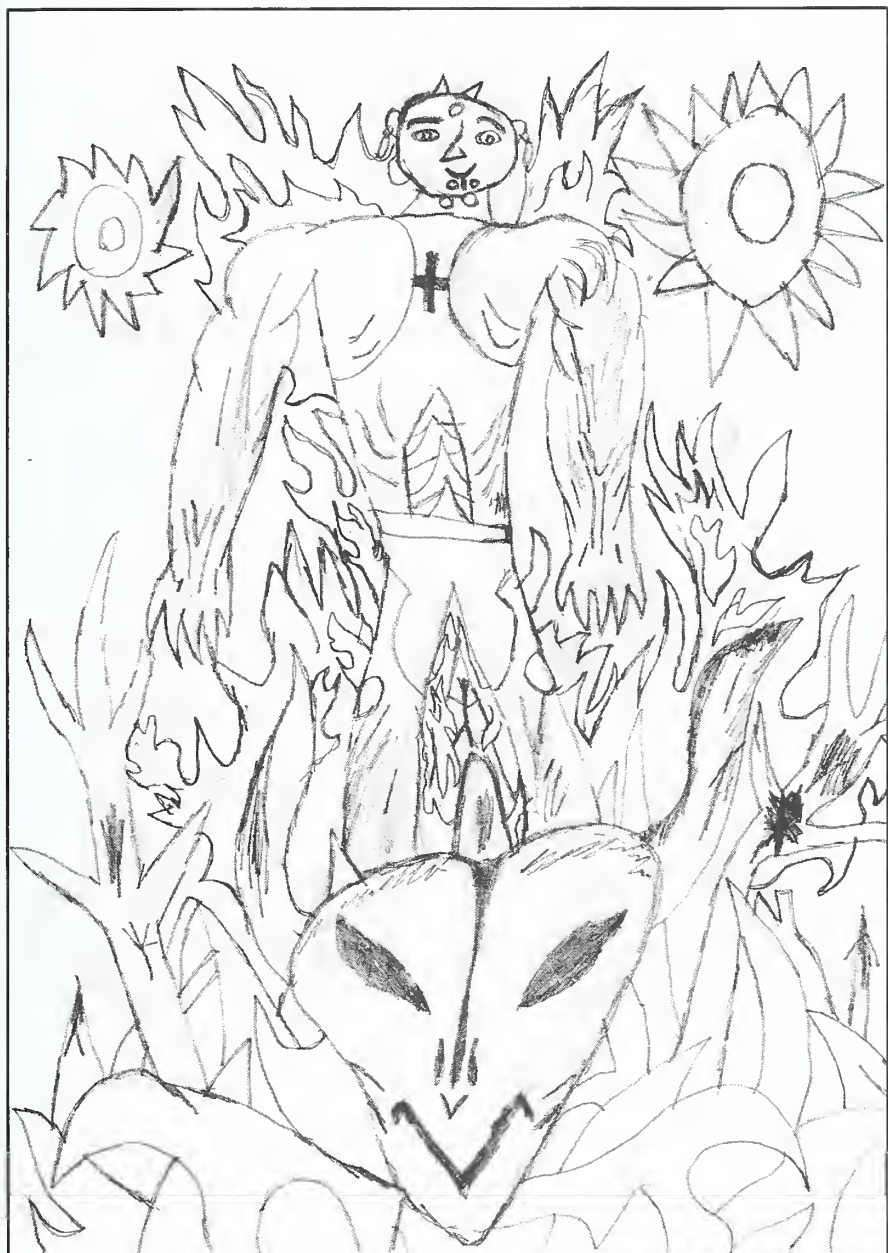
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CRY FOR BATTLE

BERNARD LILES

I stood there watching as the children of the Earth rose up against us.

I've walked a thousand worlds, in ten-thousand realms throughout time and space. There is always the same result, a million times over. They see me coming, a stranger from a distant land, from a different world. I am welcomed with hopes of peace. Peace is the absence of conflict, of war. But war is what I am all about. Without war, there is no struggle, and without struggle, the people grow weak in their facile lives.

I am here to change all of that now. I am a force of destruction. I am the embodiment of death. I am a fighter. I am the endless struggle for succession. I am the god of war. No, I am war, the battle that does not end until there is no one left to continue the good fight. Oh, how good the fight was, and is, and will be again.

I look on at the men and the women in their armor. Each one comes from a different land, a different nation on this blue, watery world, which is about to become an ocean of red blood. They march on toward me, toward their doom. Some of them walk with their war machines, and with weapons of mass destruction. Each one is armed with either a weapon or a machine-pack with weapons. I listen to the sound of the wind blowing past, with the smell of metal and powder. I can see the anger in their eyes, and smell their lust for blood and desire for death.

I also hear an unfamiliar sound coming from someone next to me. I look down, and see a person, my brother, crying before the battle has begun. "Why are you crying, brother?"

"I weep because tomorrow comes today, and yesterday is gone. Yesterday is gone, like the memories of all who died a death from which there is no return. They died fighting a fight they could not possibly win. Their magic and their steel could not save them from their own destruction. Now we fight humans, warriors with metal monsters with weapons mounted on their backs, and flying machines that carry metal firebombs. Now, we must lay waste to another world to end another life. All this to satisfy your hunger for death and destruction! Why? Why can we not have peace, and stop the violence once and for all? Tens of trillions have died - how many more must die before you stop?"

"When will it end? It will be finished when there is no one left to kill. On that day, I will be happy - overjoyed, even. Until then, the master of war marches on to strike down another life."

"If all life ends, then all that you are will cease to be. Is that what you want?"

"What I want? I want to fight the ultimate opponent, Death himself. Win or lose, I will have that fight! I want him to be there when I kill the last, and defeat the unstoppable." I would bring an end to everything in the process. "I have to do this. I need to do this. Life created me, and in return, I end life. The creation shall become the destroyer." I draw my battle axe and sword to cut down a member of my family, and as I did so I said, "I kill what needs to be killed! I do

what must be done! I will never stop, nor be stopped by anyone! I shall destroy Death, and all he has power over, and in doing so kill myself! You shall not stand in the way of total annihilation, neither you nor the gods in the heavens and the demons in Hell. I will destroy them first, with any other that rises up! Now die with your hope of peace! That is for the weak, only to make them weaker! I shall not become weak like you! Never again!" I cut him down, ending one life that was precious to me. Now I turn my eyes to the battle ahead.

I watch as they unleash their war machines' destructive power on me and the rest of my family. I jumped up to take the hit head on. The full force of their attacks could do nothing but empower and enrage me. Their strongest weapon, a device with the power of the sun, had no effect on me. It was like the force of ten stars exploding in my face. We just laughed at their futile attempt to wage war. We ran at them to show them how to fight a real battle, as their numbers dwindled to nothing. One of them said a prayer in hopes that someone would save them.

Then, all the gods in heaven appeared in the sky above. I was hoping for more to come, and they did. The ground opened, and the devil himself walked out with legions of demons at his sides. I yelled at my family "The newcomers are all mine." Some wanted to help me fight them. Others wanted to watch the fight. I cut some of the gods down before their king strikes me down to earth. I am not going to die like this, not to some pathetic creature, being crushed by a divine being. I jump up, and strike down the rest of the gods as the demons swamp me. I destroyed them, too. The king of Heaven and the king of Hell both attack with fire and lightning. I turn their attacks into fuel to feed my power. I kill them slowly and painfully.

When the last man falls, I look at his horrific form: Death. "You have supplied me with many souls," he said as he walks over to me. "Why do you want me?"

"I want an end to it all."

"Everyone meets me in the end. It is inevitable."

"That is why I am here to stop it, by killing you. I have no desire to continue. I want to end you and everything around us."

He smiled as he looked around to see a hundred men and women surrounding us. I attack, and cut him down with a swing from my sword before he knows I am coming. I turn against my family, who raise arms against me only to be swept away in my fury. Now I've done it. I've fought the battle to end all wars. There is no one left to kill. No one left to die. No one, save for me. "Should we go then?" I said to myself. "For I want to die now, and you are going to help me with that."

FROSTBITTEN

OLIVIA SIMPSON

The sun hits it, but it casts no shadow.
There is only the silver-blue glimmer of its rough edges
encapsulating forked branches and fractured memories.
I need only run the tip of my fingers over its surface
and I am suddenly numb, immobile
in a frozen sea of snapshots,
and I remember.
There was a smell. Pungent
like crushed pine needles and fearful sweat.
Wandering desperately around
the labyrinth of ice encrusted trees.
She hopes only that she does not die.
Not here, alone in January.
The room is crowded.
She finds a way to be alone.
Encased in her solitude,
she feels the jagged pieces bend and break
under the millstones of her teeth.
The cold refreshes her,
as does the knowledge that she melted it.
A sharp crack reduces the sea
to a frothing liquid once more.
But even without the frozen ocean,
I do not forget.
How ice frosts and impersonalizes.
A lifetime of memories,
infinitely cold and endless.

ALL THE SEASONS OF LIFE

VICTORIA FONG

Spring the season of flowers and rain,
Summer, the season of drought.
Fall the season of color and death,
Winter the season of doubt.
These are the seasons that make up our year,
and show us that at our worst,
change can appear.



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MAGNOLIAS IN A HURRICANE

SHAUN TERRY

He sat across from me, the skin on his face bunched and tense, seeming to stretch and contract in several directions all at once. I could feel the breadth of the lump in his throat, and I waited for the tears in his shimmering eyes to reach a critical mass. The wind blew a swollen, acidic air, and I could smell magnolias from a few hundred yards away. His breaths carried the weight of an elephant's feet, but his heart didn't beat so much as it oscillated.

He hooked his eyes into mine, enslaving me to sympathetic anguish. Where, moments earlier, the world had seemed tidy and joyous, my stomach had lost its balance. By his influence, I was suddenly reeling from the unforgiving recognition of unwitting cruelties, isolations, and insignificances.

He spoke deliberately, trying in vain to hide himself among all these people. His voice maintained slow, legato slides from one pitch to the next, above undertones of broken, sporadic vibrato. I felt trapped – naked in his assault – with him striking at my feelings of guilt and duty.

And I wouldn't escape without committing to bloodying my hands.

Because, for all my progress and self-defense, I could never be very different from him.



"Mother" Copyright © 2015 Britney Balmer

I feel.... Air, rushing across my face and body. It is a beautiful feeling, the wind whipping my suit. I hear the flapping sound of the fabric and the air whistling into my ears as I slowly move my head from side to side, as if that will steer me back and forth through the atmosphere. As I spread my arms and legs, I seem to glide across the horizon. The sun is warm on my back, and the contrast of that with the cool breeze on my front is an interesting feeling.

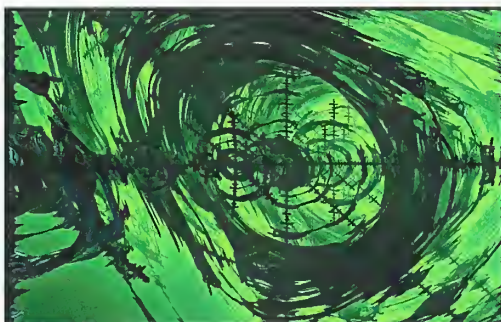
I close my eyes, and I imagine myself at the beach with my family, standing on the dunes with my arms outstretched, absorbing the healing rays of sunlight. Breathing deeply of the fresh ocean air. I think of roller coasters with my brother, right at the top before the fall, when I could see for miles, suspended in motion for that instant with butterflies in my stomach, filled with excited anticipation. A picnic with the love of my life, the canopy of the trees above breaking the light into patterns on the ground, the leaves rustling with each autumn gust, singing hearts... Fleeting snapshots of moments that I have been looking for, for so long.

I come back to the present. As I traverse gravity, I feel free. My fingertips and the tips of my toes are tingling. I take a deep, deliberate breath. I feel like I can begin to understand the beauty in life. My mind opens, and, in a transforming way, the pieces all begin to come together. My family, my life, my decisions, my accomplishments, my goals, my disappointments, my mistakes, and my fears. I open my eyes and look across the expanse. I fixate on the sun. As it sets behind the clouds, above the ocean right in front of me, I seem to resonate with the harmony of my surroundings. The stunning colors of the clouds reflecting the magnificence of nature itself. Deep purples and gorgeous pinks. The shimmering water dancing with the sunlight. A feeling of bliss washes over me. I finally, finally found what I have been looking for. For so long, I have been looking for this feeling.....

I look down and see the concrete sidewalks and asphalt streets roaring towards me. My body meets the ground with thunderous force.



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DAUGHTER OF ELEPHANTS

OLIVIA SIMPSON

I.

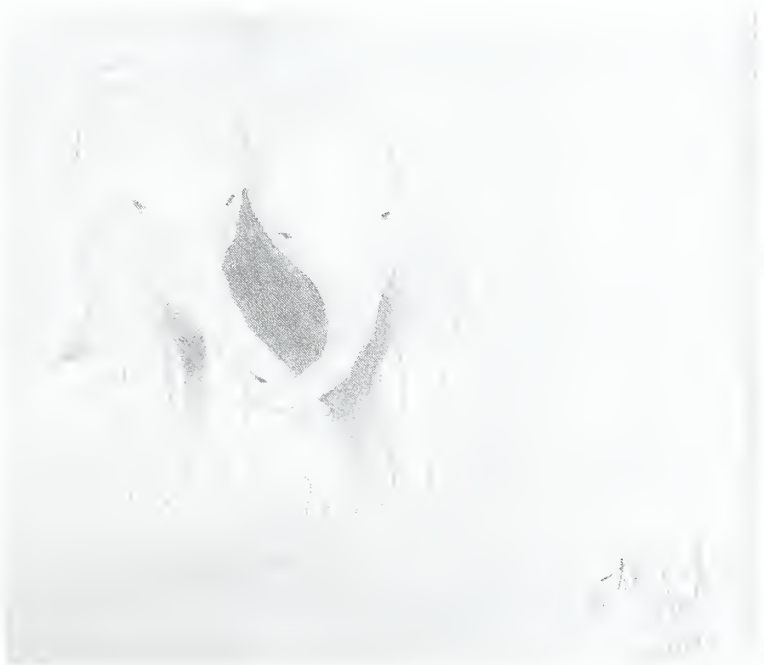
At night I would steal
into my mother's room. Lift
earrings from their places on the rack,
ordered in pairs like animals
waiting to board the ark, and with
great ceremony, hook them over the shelf
of my lip, the outer cartilage of my ears,
into the tangles of my hair and feel
their weight. As though turquoise
beads and ivory feathers could pull
my miniature form into skin
roughened by the experience
of Indian sunlight, curls greasy with
thoughts of a Mediterranean coast.

II.

Almost as important was to memorize
the order, whether the hematite orbs
came before the amethyst, the pearls after.
As though the next morning, the bronze
pair not quite where she had left them,
my mother would know. They had been
the centerpiece of a previously secret
ceremony. Or that she would see me
in the mirror, making sure to take quiet
breaths so as to witness privately
myself transformed by the addition
of foreign trinkets, their exotic
luminescence almost enough to stretch
my shadow to the length of her bed.

III.

She says she knew all along,
that replicating the correct sequence
of her jewelry wasn't enough to disguise
a girl walking on tip-toes, reaching
for a more authentic imitation of her mother's
height. That in an image of bronze elephants
flashing through strands of familiar
hair, she saw the importance of a coming
moment when nestled on my pillow, a pair
of earrings would be waiting. The imprint
of a hammer dancing along their backs
like rain patterning the surface of a lake or
oil drifting across a bowl of chicken soup.



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PRAYERS

STEVE GILL

“...And right there you can see it plain as day folks, Jeremiah 17:9, ‘The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?’ Why do we deceive? Why do we sin? I ask myself these questions every day. I pray every night that the lord will keep me on his path of righteousness. I assure you, it is not an easy task, but with the help of the Lord God.... Anything is possible. Here it is people, right here, Revelation 21:8, ‘But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is second to death.’ Is that where you want to end up? Is that where you want your children to end up? You need to wake up and follow the Lord, or you will be on the other side. And folk’s, lemme tell you, if you are on the other side and you meet the might of the Lord God, it is not going to be pretty. The lake of fire burns hot and long with the wrath of the Lord. So pick your side, and pray to God to forgive you of your sins. Then you may begin to walk in his path, and feel his light shining upon you. And that is about all the time we are gonna have left together this week, folks. Please do not forget what it says in Leviticus, ya’ll. Your tithing is going to help to grow this church into a real wonder, and a testament to the Lord’s will and power. Thank you all so much for coming. Please bow your heads so that we may pray together.”

The crowd was enamored of him. Monday through Saturday they worshipped God, but on Sundays, when the big pearly white doors of the Tri-County Baptist Church swung open, they worshipped Reverend Howard. A rotund, toad-like man. Always sweaty and always moving, animated with the message of the Lord. Dressed in his clean suits and shiny shoes. Gold chains around his neck bearing the cross, gold frames on his light-brown tinted glasses, a large gold ring squeezed onto his fat little finger, shouting truth into the microphone with the conviction of a true believer. Some of his congregation prayed in a standing position, with their hands in the air, palms facing forward, as if it would channel their prayers to God more directly that way.

Goddamn fools, he thought to himself. Standing there like idiots. You cheap bastards better be loading up the collection plate. I work so hard and do so much for you, and for what? You can’t even give up the ten percent that the goddamn Bible is telling you to give up? I need money. This bullshit lately is not going to cut it.

As the congregation lay silent in prayer, the exalted Reverend slowly walked down the aisle with his head lowered.

Lord, please continue to bless me with riches. Please provide enough money for me to pay off my debts to these slimy bastards. Please keep me safe from harm and danger Lord, please continue to fulfill my desires and quench my lust. Please let the boy’s camp that I am running this weekend be filled with rewards of the flesh. In your most profitable name, I pray, Amen.

On the steps of the church, as the people filed out and stopped to hug and praise the great Reverend for the quotes he pulled from online to scare them

with that particular morning, he glimpsed up at the sky and reveled in what he had created, the control of his own masses. His will be done. The shepherd and the sheep. When his feet came back to the ground, he noticed Timothy Green approaching, parentless as it would appear.

Little Timmy, how cliché. I doubt your parents will mind you staying a little late to help the Reverend put up Christmas decorations. I haven't had one like him pop up in years. So young looking, so innocent, so blind.

"Hello Timothy. How are you my son? Have you been following the will of the Lord, and have you accepted Jesus fully into your heart? I understand your folks were unable to make it to my sermon today, is that right? Well, would you mind meeting me in my office in a couple of minutes so I can discuss some of the Lord's will with you? Then you can help me and the other children set up Christmas decorations."

The young boy nodded.

"Thank you Timothy. I will see you soon."

A wicked smile darted across Reverend Howard's face for just a moment. He headed for his office.

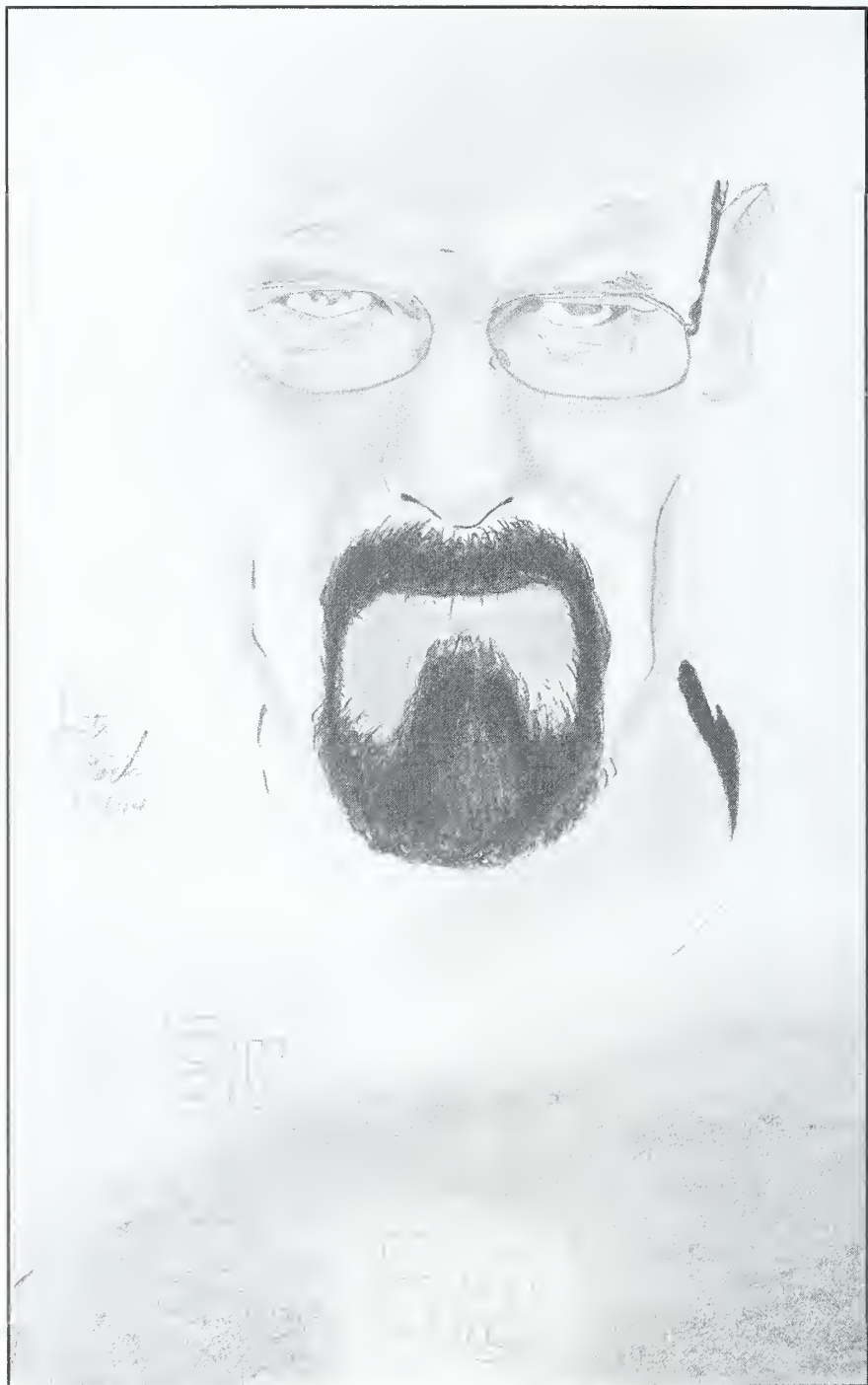
Five minutes later Timothy entered. "Have a seat my son, have a seat. I have so much to talk about, and have been so grateful to see you grow up in my congregation through all of these years. You have become such a robust young man. Strapping. You also seem very smart, and that is good. What I want to talk about with you is service to the Lord. Sometimes, the Lord will call on you, and you will have to answer. No matter what he asks of you, it is the will of God, do you understand? The laws of God rule the laws of man, and not the other way around, so no matter how crazy something may seem, if it comes from the Lord, or through me, it is his will that you serve. I am a messenger for God, and you are one of his loyal followers. You are loyal to God, aren't you? You would do anything God wanted you to do, wouldn't you? Anything to go to Heaven?"

The young boy nodded.

The Reverend turned his back on Timothy and began to unbutton his shirt.....

Suddenly, a searing pain shot up his left arm. He instantly felt a tightness in his chest, and grabbed at his heart. He turned around in time to see little Timothy Green growing fuzzy to him. He gasped for breath as the paralyzing pain consumed him. He was sweatier than normal now, blood dripping from his mouth and nose onto his shiny white shoes with a sharp, thick 'plop'. His chains broke as he desperately clawed at his chest in hopes of relief, of anything. His lips, the lips he had used to whisper lies to so many, turned ashen grey first, then a purplish blue, along with his plump face and neck. He fell on the floor and shattered his glasses, his lightly tinted glasses that hid his devilish gaze just enough. Slowly, he crossed his feet, and his arms curled up into his body as his last nerve synapses fired off. He died right there, in front of little Timothy.

The following week, the dear Reverend was laid to rest by the hundreds in his congregation. The ceremony was beautiful, and expensive. One last "Hurrah!" for the old Reverend Howard. He died a saint to them, loved by nearly all in his congregation, except for those who knew his darkest secrets.



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Before I could see the cloud of smoke reaching toward the grey ceiling of the sky, I could smell it. The sharp, dusty smell of dried leaves and combustion that reminded me vividly of tables cluttered with turkey and salads, the adults clustered like barnacles, clinging to the solace of being one of many sinners as the fog of their cigarettes swirled through their hair.

The tempo of my boots against the gravel drive increased, and the girl attached to the smoke stream disappeared, only to rise moments later from a crouch. I arrived at the end of the drive, hair sweaty and heart pounding. The girl looked up from her phone, smiled and said,

“Hey, V.”

“Hi,” I managed, the corners of my mouth turning upwards slightly in a crude impression of a shy smile. The cigarette was gone, but the smell had adhered itself to her, a fresh yellowish stain, though it didn’t seem to bother her. She wasn’t clinging or clustered, shamed or sinner. She was thin, with vulture-like shoulders that curved around her chest, and slender fingers that flicked disinterestedly through pictures on her phone.

I remembered when her grandmother died, a little less than a month ago, before school assignment letters and regretfully efficient bus routes drew us together. She had sat in the furthest back pew, not looking at anyone and not being noticed. Her grandmother lay stiff and only a shade greyer than she had in life, choked by wreaths and bouquets. Both she and her grandmother were wearing dresses. Hers, short and flowery. Her grandmother’s, a mothball infused black.

I rearranged my backpack’s one strap over the thin sweater covering my shoulders and, in my mind, rehearsed again how I would hold the bag so that I could navigate the narrow aisle of the bus without tripping or getting stuck. We could hear the steam-engine like hissing of the bus before its hulking, mustard-colored form stopped in front of us. She went first, and I followed. The driver mumbled something at me, and I shot a quick smile at the floor before ploughing my way through the center aisle and collapsing in seat 4D. My seat.

As I had imagined, the rest of the days in that first year passed much the same. A ten minute wait perfumed by the lingering burning of tobacco and the occasional twitch of a smile, until finally we were relieved by the bus’s burly interruption. With the beginning of the spring semester, I became the first to arrive at the end of the road, until some weeks later, I was the only one waiting. Getting on the bus was the hardest, maneuvering my bulky shoulder bag through the aisle while pretending I hadn’t seen the girl disappearing into our neighbor’s car, the windows opaque, a variation of the cloud that had stained our first meeting.

When the driver snapped, “Where’s that girl? Is she coming?” I felt as though a year of mornings standing next to her, inhaling her smoke, returning her dispassionate politeness, should have meant something more than being able to reply,

“I don’t really know her.”

WEAVER STREET MARKET

WILL GOLDSMITH

Two warm mugs filled with
 deep black coffee –
mirror images at either end of the
 small table for two.
The wind howls warn of
 winter chill around the corner.
Low—and not so low—conversations
 buzz in the room, as
 piped music covers the space
 with *classics of yesterday,*
 today, and tomorrow.
The coffee mugs empty,
 as our talk becomes more intimate:
fears, hopes, dreams,
secret jealousies,
hard families,
thorns in our flesh.
Her eyes sparkle with love
and joy, reflecting the bright
sunshine bouncing off the sidewalk,
and suddenly, it doesn't seem
so cold,
and everything becomes magical.

AMONG CRICKETS AND UNDER STARS

VICTORIA FONG

I knew the moment I saw her that I was in love. Funny, that the place I fall in love is a correctional institution. As a little girl, I had always dreamt of meeting the love of my life under the stars, the sound of crickets humming in the background. Now, in the Correctional Regional Institution for Bad Behavior, as I watch my blue-haired beauty walk past the swarming crowd of teenagers, I found myself aware of the star-like ceiling lights, and the hum of the heating system, similar to low-pitched cricket chirping. It was like magic, except in a more modern and impure way.

"Kylie," I heard a deep voice call from behind me, tone raspy and firm. I groaned, turning around to see my wing's guard standing near the entrance to the classroom. He was never as fun or relaxed as the other wing guards, but he managed to keep the majority of my inmates out of trouble.

"Kylie, you know you're supposed to be in your Christian class right now," he said, his brown eyes glaring down at me from his six-foot tall frame. His grey uniform blended in with his peppered grey hair and beard, hands planted firmly on his hips so he seemed angrier than he was. He seemed out of place in contrast to the pure white walls, making him almost like a character from a story book, placed into the real world. He looked at me sternly, eyes raking me up and down. "You know the rules."

I rolled my eyes and bit my lip, shifting my weight from my left foot to the right. No one told me what to do, so I certainly wasn't going to let him boss me around. However, I knew that in order to be kept closer to my beautiful girl, I needed to be on my best behavior. It was frustrating, knowing that I had to be nice and follow rules. It wasn't in my DNA to do either of those things, and just thinking about being a "good inmate" made my skin crawl.

"I understand, Mr. Smith," I replied smoothly, briefly closing my eyes to show I was submissive, though I was trying my hardest not to punch his jaw. "I'll go change into my class clothes."

I hated my class clothes; they were restrictive, itchy, and girly. They were white to represent purity and holiness, but there was nothing holy about lacy stitching and stockings. Pulling the long dress out of the closet in my small room, I was reminded of why I hated it so much. It was so tight that it squeezed the oxygen out of my body, but it was frilly, like a young girl's dress, so I assumed it was meant to make me look slim and attractive. Instead, it made me look out of place, and pudgy in areas that gave the illusion that I was a month into pregnancy. The shoes pinched my toes together, restricting blood flow to my legs and making my long limbs grow numb within minutes.

Braiding my hair clumsily while I headed to my classroom, I was constantly turning my head around to look for the girl who had caught my eye earlier. She was shorter than me, but she seemed so full of life that it didn't matter. The gleam that I caught in her eyes screamed of her love to party, if it wasn't evident in her vibrantly colored clothing.

"Miss Andrews," my teacher scolded as I strolled in, nearly half an hour late. "We were just discussing the importance of our attire, as Mr. May has rudely pointed out that it 'is uncomfortable and hellish to wear.' Would you like to tell the class why it is so important that we dress in modesty?"

I rolled my turquoise eyes at the suggestion, taking a deep breath so I didn't begin to yell at Ms. Konlah. I thought about stalling, not long, but long enough for her to forget that she asked me to explain one of the most basic rules in our Christian class. However, she was smart, and I was too distracted by the angel-like figure that had floated by me earlier to try and plan an escape. Instead, I sat up tall and began to recite in a voice similar to a robot's.

"We Christians dress in modest clothes so that we can focus solely on our devotion to and love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Immodest attire is a distraction to those around us, and an act of selfishness in an attempt to draw others' attention to ourselves. We must cover ourselves so as to preserve ourselves for Him."

Instead of trusting my instincts of ending on a good note, I laughed loudly and added with a rude smirk, "God, was that painful! This is a new age, and we shouldn't be forced to wear clothes that itch and cover up what God gave us!"

Laughter bubbled through my peers, little snorts erupting from some of the boys in the back row. Feet were stomped, and hands slapped against the top of desks in comical fits, until interrupted by a loud 'smack' of Ms. Konlah's yardstick on her desk.

"Silence!" she demanded, her demon-like eyes narrowed into slits on the top of her face. Her foot tapped at a rapid pace on the floor, her hand with the wooden stick raised in preparation to strike. She stalked around the room, watching every student like a hawk would its prey, making her way around to me.

Everyone else was scared of her; I didn't blame them. Ms. Konlah had the demeanor of a Doberman Pinscher with rabies, and she was never hesitant to smack children on their asses with her yard stick. Some kids even thought that she would bite them if they misbehaved badly enough. However, with the horrible instincts that I possessed, I remained fearless of the ugly lady slamming her weapon of discipline upon my desk. My eyes locked onto her own, my smirk plastered onto my face, unwavering, aggravating the woman to no end.

Opening her mouth to reveal crooked and browned teeth, she roughly

sucked in air before reprimanding me in a hushed tone. “Miss Andrews,” she whispered, rotting teeth clenched together tightly. “Accompany me to the hallway, now.”

I had endured my share of beatings, so I wasn’t the least bit afraid of this one. The only emotion I felt was potential shame. What-if’s darted through my head, all of them featuring the beautiful blue-haired girl that stole my heart. What if she saw the red marks from my beating and didn’t like me anymore? What if the scars turned her off, or even repulsed her? The possibilities were endless, and they raced through my mind like miniature fish fleeing from sharks.

“How dare you disrespect me in front of the class?” Ms. Konlah snarled under her breath, raising her measuring stick high into the air. “This is the last time that you humiliate me in this institution!”

~~~~~

The beating itself wasn’t nearly as bad as she made it out to be, but my ass hurt for a significant bit afterwards. I was sure that it would stay red for days, and I prayed that the new girl didn’t notice or care. Who I prayed to, however, was the reason that I was in C.R.I.B.B. in the first place. I was brought up in a heavily devout Christian family, and per the new law, I was required to obey their religion until I was eighteen. As the little rebel that I was, I hated following my parents’ rules, and instead decided to go the other route and worship Satan. It wasn’t as bad as my parent’s had taught me. Satanism valued individualism and uniqueness, something that I found lacking in the Christian environment that my parents brought me up in. Though I was sure many other Christian families weren’t so restricting or strange, my situation was horribly rigid, and with my rebellious attitude, I attempted to find a religion that both defied my parents and provided me with the nurturing environment I was lacking. It took me a while, but I eventually arrived at Satanism.

After Christian class was over, I rushed to my room to get changed into my more comfortable and casual clothing. Faces zipped past me, bodies becoming blurs, until I arrived at my tiny bedroom. My room wasn’t much: four walls, a bed, books, and a single picture taped above my pillow. The picture was of me when I first arrived at the C.R.I.B.B., adorned in my torn muscle shirt, showing off my freshly inked tattoo of a middle finger on my arm. My hair was a mess in the photo, and not much had changed since. I never cared much about the state of my hair, and more often than not left it tangled and wild. In the photo, the scars on my face and arms were more prominent, achieved through rough fights in alleyways and falls from my skateboard. Now, they had healed and begun to fade away, much to my dismay. They were one of my favorite features of myself.

Pulling a semi-long dress out of my closet, I threw it on, tossing my class clothing aside disdainfully. The dress was neither loose nor tight fitting. However, it was soft, and resembled a long sweatshirt. The long sleeves felt silky on



my skin, and I twirled around and watched it flare out, imagining I was Marilyn Monroe. Grinning to myself, I closed the door to my room as I walked out into the “play yard” as our guards called it, eager to find my flighty beauty.

It wasn't difficult to find her, given that her bright blue hair contrasted so gorgeously with the white walls of the C.R.I.B.B. All morning, I had been planning for this moment, but now that I was staring it straight in the face, I struggled to find the courage to play out my plan. She was sitting on an armchair, laughing with some other kids that I failed to recognize, making it difficult for me to randomly approach her. Sucking in a cold breath of air, I puffed up my chest, smoothed out my dress, and marched toward her, a determined look covering my overwhelming nervousness.

“Hi,” I said confidently, hiding my shaking hands behind my back, now standing in front of the group.

Looking at me with a small smile, the girl raised an eyebrow and parted her beautifully thin lips to speak. “Hey,” she said, flashing her white teeth at me, making my stomach flip over and causing the millions of butterflies to flutter around. “What's your name?” Her every word flirted with me, and she leaned towards me, revealing nicely sized cleavage, despite the cover-up of her attire. I felt myself begin to drool.

“Kylie,” I said, grinning and leaning down to her level. “I saw you come in here earlier.” As I spoke, our blue eyes met and I felt my heart in my throat. She was absolutely gorgeous, and I was completely unsure of what else to say.

“Did you, now?” she chuckled, tossing her wavy blue hair over her shoulder, showing off her spotless pale skin. “I think I saw you too.” Laughing loudly, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, clutching her chest with closed hands. “Yeah, you were the one with the dropped jaw and the drool!”

I had never felt so embarrassed in my entire life. I was sure that I had done what she said, but I wasn't at all aware that she had noticed. Speechless, I stood there slack-jawed, eyes wide and breathing slow. With laughter rippling through her group, I recollected myself and hoped that they didn't notice my momentary lack of confidence.

“Well, why wouldn't I stop and stare?” I questioned, twirling a strand of my brown hair around a finger, quirked a flirty eyebrow at her in hopes of diverting her thoughts from the embarrassing events of earlier. “What's your name?” I was sure that my voice cracked while I asked, but the humiliation I felt couldn't be worsened, even as I felt my knees tremble and ankles quiver.

Flicking her eyes to each of her companions, she responded with a sass-filled tone, tilting her chin up and half closing her eyes, raising a hand to lightly support her head. “Danielle,” she stated, eyes raking up and down my body, the

look on her face a mixture of hunger and laughter. I couldn't decide whether she was picturing me naked, or laughing at my fear. I wasn't used to being this nervous, and it was quite unnerving.

"I go by Danny, though," the girl said, holding out her other hand to shake, and I stared at it in wonder. By offering her hand, she was showing that she was accepting of my fearful behavior, open to becoming friends - or more - with me. Without wasting time, I reached out and gripped her hand firmly, feeling her soft skin against my hard, callused one.

With a grin, Danny retracted her hand and began to point out each of her friends, introducing each with a wider grin than before. "That's Edge," she said, nodding her head in the direction of a tall boy who was slouching against a chair.

"The name's Eshin, but my friends call me Edge," he explained casually holding out a friendly hand, amber eyes soft and caring. "Family's Buddhist, but I want to learn about all of the different religions, so they stuffed me in here. They didn't really like that I was studying Japanese religions."

After Eshin spoke, the other two introductions went by reasonably fast. The other girl was Anika, a Muslim in for learning Christianity, and the boy was Jaime, a Shinto sent to the C.R.I.B.B. because he wanted to be an atheist. Both teens were relatively quiet, but Jaime refused to say anything more than his name, forcing Danny to tell me the rest about him.

"He doesn't say much," she said, shrugging. She seemed to accept it, so I didn't have a reason not to. "He's just too wrapped up in his own head," she laughed, ruffling the dirty blonde hair on his head. "We're all weird, but we're family."

It was at that moment that I felt like I was part of the family too. I had friends, and for once, I didn't feel alone.

# THE SILVER BOX

TONI BROWN

He was oh so sweet, nice and loving  
Paid attention to me and all that I was doing  
He treated me to movies, dinners, and shows  
Then he'd always wonder where I'd go  
He'd call and call, then drive by to see  
If I was in the place he thought I should be  
If I couldn't be found, he'd leave angry decrees...  
Then he'd let me know it was all out of concern  
Then the next call was mean again, I didn't know that was reason for alarm  
Then he'd arrive with a shiny box, with a present inside  
To make up for all that was said before  
All he kept saying was I'm sorry, I'm sorry,  
I just lost my head, and meant nothing by it  
I just care so much for and I can't deny it  
If you can forgive me this once, I promise you won't see that side again.  
We kissed and made up and he told me his dreams  
Dreams of the people that had done him so wrong  
He began to think that he didn't belong  
In a relationship that required any thought, only those that could be bought  
Surprisingly those dreams included me and the love and adoration that he knew  
I deserved  
That made it all better, I'll have to admit, no need to say good bye and act like a  
twit  
He continued to dine me and take me out to shows,  
I'd do special things for him when I could, but who knows...  
Then there was another episode of anger and flailing when he couldn't reach me  
when he went searching  
All kinds of mean words and angry tones, this time really chilled me to the bone  
Then came another box, shiny as the other, more surprises, I didn't think I de-  
served  
When I didn't want to accept it, he couldn't believe the nerve

Of me not accepting what he'd brought to me. He forced me to take it and open  
it up

So I did and I loved and cherished it so, that I wore it and showed it everywhere  
I'd go

The next time he called and I didn't answer, the message was different

It was mean and threatening, and quite rude, it was such a shock from what I  
know of this dude

The threats that he made were very clear, that I'd never live to see my family so  
dear

If I didn't stop hiding from him, and being invisible

He needed to know my whereabouts at all times without being concealed

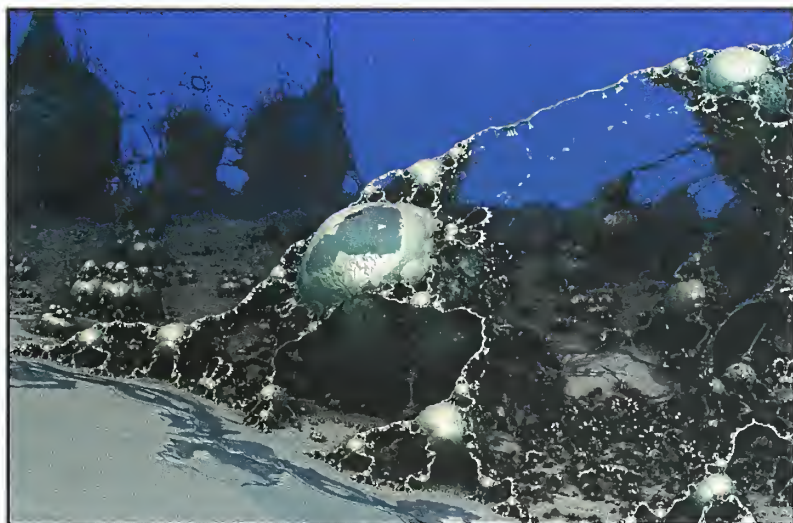
He couldn't take it if I'd been disloyal, really, did he think he was a royal

Who were you with, what's his name, where did you go, don't make me ask you  
again

Now this box is shiny and bigger than the rest

As I lay in the front of the church

It opens up... just below my chest.



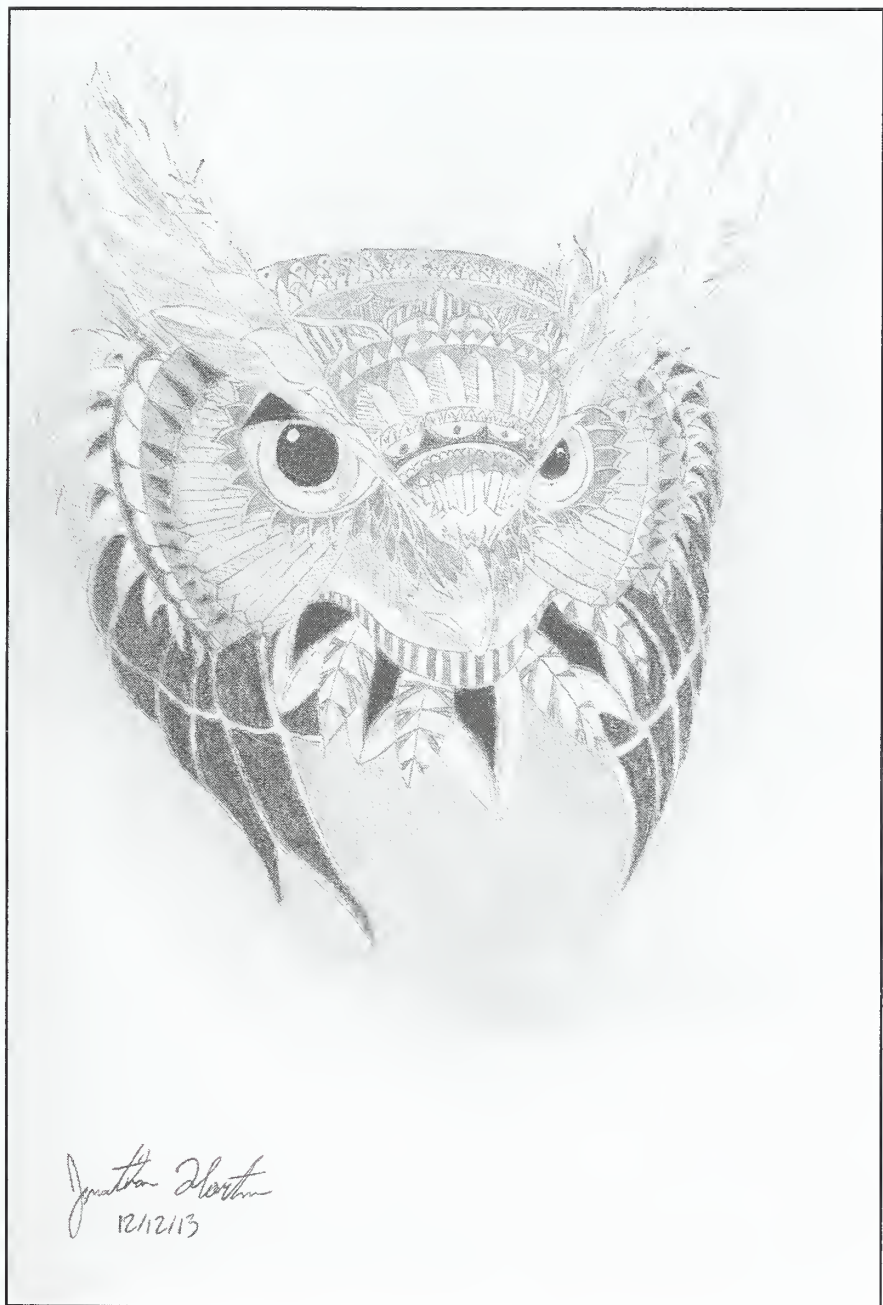
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# TO BE LOSING; TO BE LOST

SHAUN TERRY

I've been wearing your favorite shirt  
for the past five days.  
It still smells of rosemary.  
I met a girl last night.  
All I wanted to do was to cry to her,  
and talk about you,  
but I slept with her, instead,  
and I thought about you,  
just like the other time,  
except that I didn't sleep with that one-  
not exactly.  
I listened to Duke,  
and he says that nothing need change,  
but what the hell does Duke know?  
We lived inches apart,  
sucking each other's breaths,  
politely glancing past each other,  
taking out each other's trash,  
counting the walls between us.  
We played a game called, "Who can take a longer shower?"  
We both lost.  
I haven't written about anything but you  
for five weeks now.  
And I haven't seen your eyes  
in ten days.  
So I packed all my things  
in my unregistered car,  
and I slept  
on a stranger's floor.  
That's where I live now,  
but I couldn't tell you  
where it is that I'm supposed to call home.





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# DON'T GO

JAMES BARROW

*There is a moment in every TV show with a guy and a girl who have feelings for each other (and by that I mean every TV show) when one of them is having doubts about their relationship. They have a conversation and the girl starts walking away. At that moment, my heart screams for the guy to break down and beg her not to leave. I dedicate this rap to that moment.*

Can't explain how I feel, not sure if it's real  
Or just a trick of the mind, making me blind  
Is it time to rewind or just leave this behind  
Go back to the start or is this where we part?

So I walk away, nothing left to say  
But the feeling's not right, something's not ok  
I can't seem to win so I say to her

Turn around, my dear, I need to make this clear  
I can't be alone, I need you here  
Please understand, I can't stand on my own  
Don't go, you should know  
I wrote this song to explain  
I was wrong and how I came  
To see how much I need you

She looks at me skeptically  
Is this just a game? A con that I'm running  
As I call out her name  
She's clearly unsure, but I've made up my mind  
And somehow the words I find

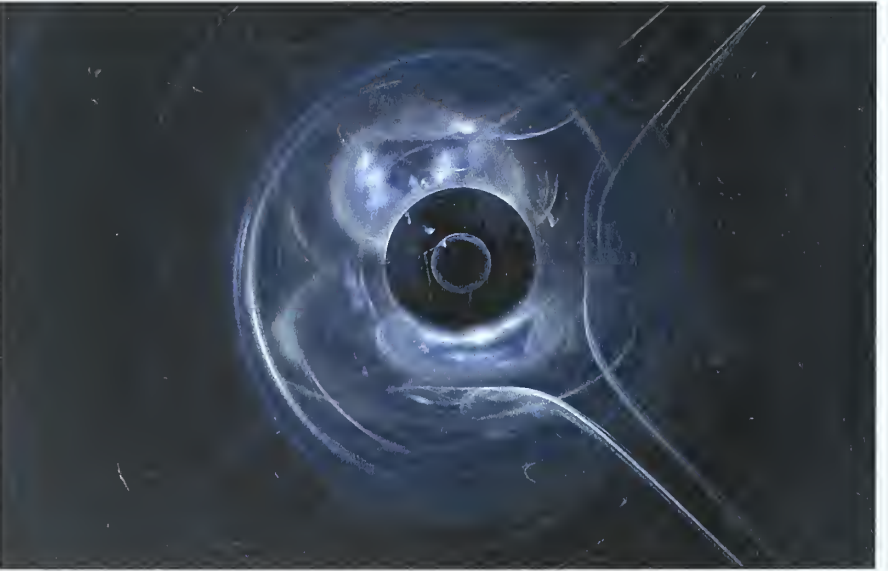
Come back, my friend, this isn't the end  
There's no problem I've made that we can't mend  
Please understand, I can't stand on my own  
Don't go, you should know  
That I'm crying inside at the thought of you gone  
And my heart open wide and trampled on  
Now that I know I need you

She starts to smile, that beautiful smile  
That's something I haven't seen in a while  
And I remember the first time she blew me away  
With that smile I long for every day  
And I realize she might be coming around  
So one more time I compose a rhyme  
And take a knee for this final plea

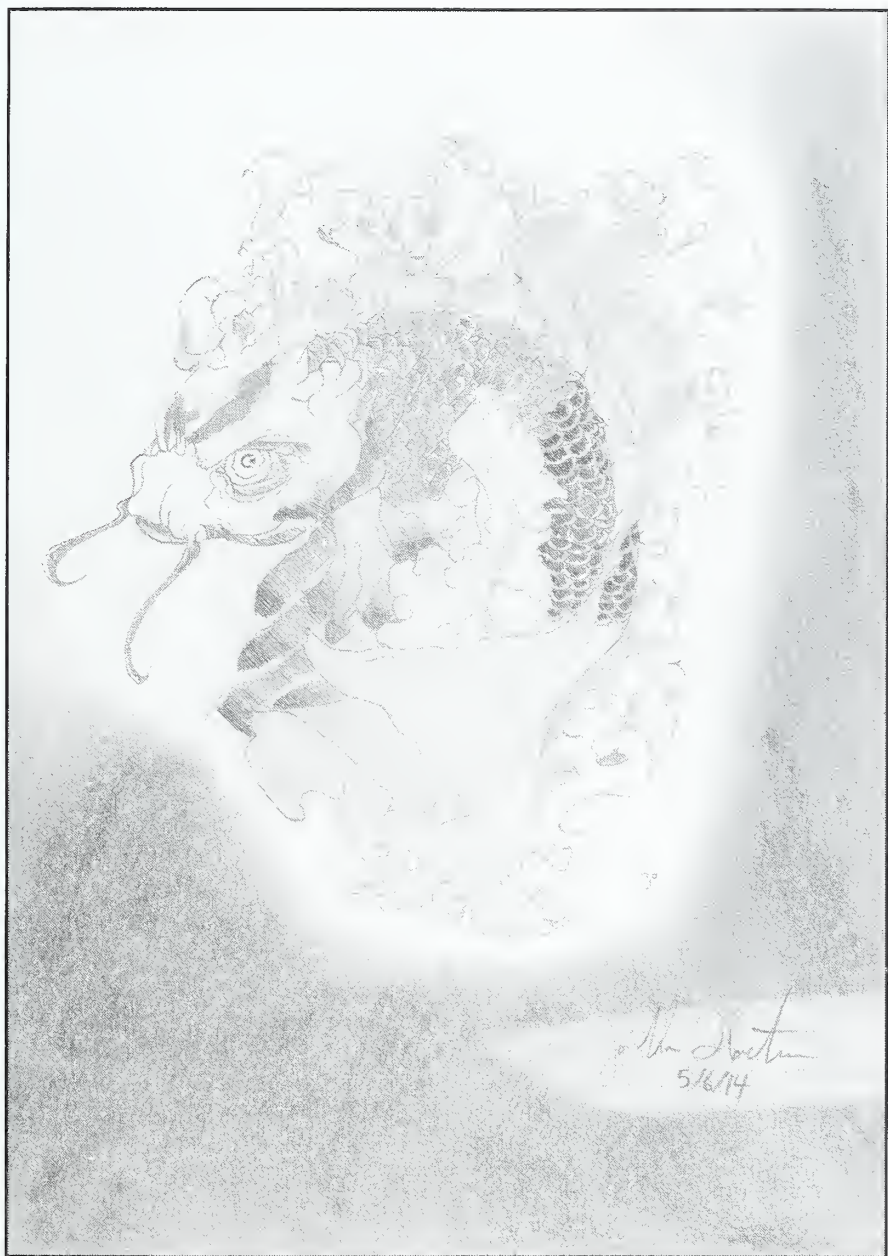
Come back to me, girl, can't you see  
My minds obsessed with you and me  
I'm a broken man, don't you understand?  
Don't go, don't you know  
You're the reason I sing as I stand on this stage  
Are you listening? I won't turn the page  
And go. I can't move on without you  
I can't move at all without you



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# BEST LOVE SONG EVER

JAY SARTOR

As I sit here in the early morning hours,  
As I take my time putting my thoughts together on this paper,  
It reminds me of the first time you ever told me you loved me.  
I realize your love may only be love from friend to friend.  
I understand but thinking about those three special words rolling off your lips is  
the best love song ever.

While those words may not seem like a love song to some it is one for me.  
The reason is it meant so much for me to be considered so special to you.  
You took the time to share those words with me and every time I'm a little down,  
I internalize those words in my head and turn them into a melody.  
That is one reason those simple words are the best love song ever to me.  
This love song could have been shared with anybody but you kindly chose me.  
The first time you shared this melody and song with me,  
It came as a shock that it was meant for me.

But now, that you have exposed it to me,  
I take your sincerity and turn it into an inspirational melody.  
Remembering that I am loved by you motivates and encourages me.  
I thank you for writing those words to inspire me.  
When you want or need it, you know where my love will be.  
I love everything you do for me.

Normally, with love I'm never selfish but in your case, I will be.  
Because this song you made to inspire me with its melody, when I hear you say  
"I love you" I know those special words were only meant to be claimed by me.  
No matter how much you say it to me it is still as special as the first time those  
words fell from your lips to become my song as well as its chosen melody.  
You could say it forever to me.

It would still be the best love song ever because it was written by your heart and  
dedicated from you just for me.  
It's a special song I cherish in my heart daily.

# AN UNRECOGNIZABLE MESSIAH

SHAUN TERRY

"I'm old again, today," he said. Years of wear and diligent ironing had softened the pleats in his brown, woolen pants.

She sat cross-legged, reading her book.

*If I could see what it was, I'd probably think that it's pretentious*, he thought. He cleared his dry throat and glared in her direction. He repeated, a little more loudly, "I'm old again, today."

She grabbed her bookmark, and gently placed it between the supple pages of her beautiful, sweet-smelling book, and laid it next to her. She wriggled her nose as she pushed the bridge of her glasses up slightly, to look at him more clearly. With all the enthusiasm of a limestone wall, she uttered, "Happy birthday."

Feeling a little foolish, his glare softened, and almost-inaudibly, he responded, "Thank you."

She smiled, but if you only saw her from the cheeks upward, you wouldn't have known that any part of her had moved at all. He knew that fake smile, but what could he say? She continued to look at him, wondering if he'd continue to molest her with demands for attention.

But she loved him. She loved his face. Even when he was irritating her like this, she could look at any part of his face and feel gratified; relieved at all the wonder that she discovered by looking at the skin and bones that made up this grouchy old neurotic. The easiest thing for her to do, though, was to pretend to be indifferent and unimpressed, so as to avoid encouraging his whines for attention. When she was good and intoxicated, or otherwise in some emotionally vulnerable state, she would let just enough information out that he might guess how she generally felt about him. But normally, he was in a constant state of paranoia and absolute insecurity about how she saw him.

It wasn't just her, though. He was simply unsure about these sorts of things. And who could blame him? He'd been given a life of privilege, and he'd pursued every avenue he could think of to find happiness, each with equal half-steps, only to be left feeling vindicated in mild self-loathing. "Milquetoast, even in my melancholia," he'd once said. He was in his mid-forties, and fast-approaching middle-age, he thought. He was an attractive man, but maybe only to just the right sort of quirky person. No one would stop in the street to admire this sort of attractive man, although he didn't look nearly his age. His head was filled with shiny, white hairs, and tiny wrinkles ruled over his face, and still, no one would guess that he was much older than in his mid-thirties. Once in a while, a kid at a convenience store or tending the bar would ask for his ID, and this delighted the vain, old fool.

The funny thing, though, was that for all his misconceptions about himself, and his at-times irritating obliviousness, he'd lost all the energy to fight with people that he'd fought with in his youth. He'd given up on winning arguments, trying to dominate people, and trying to impress people, and had resigned himself to simply appeasing people, and benevolently tricking them into temporary

contentment and even glee when he could. That is, unless he was feeling needy. He seemed to vacillate between being the most thoughtful, emotionally-clairvoyant man, sweeter than rose water and honey, and being a self-centered, whimpering lapdog.

*He's lucky that he has all the things that no other man ever has*, she thought, *because he doesn't have any of the things that so many men do have*. But she knew that what he had was far more valuable than what all the conventionally-attractive suitors had to offer. Sometimes, she thought that she'd love to be with a handsome, responsible, confident young man, and then she'd meet one and realize how shallow he was, how hollow and uninspired he was beneath his impenetrable facade.

And she could have most of those men. It was probably true that no one could be what everyone wants, but nearly everyone did want her, at least until their most persnickety preferences came to bear.

But in fact, she'd made her choice. Maybe he'd chosen her, too, and sometimes, she wondered about that. The truth was that he had so much power over her, emotionally, that it scared her. She tried to keep the fact from him, even though she knew that he was far too gentle to be inclined to hurt her – a neurosis of her own – but he made her happy. She wouldn't want any other man, and she was usually never tempted. He was quite special, she figured. He'd lucked into a beautiful, intelligent, generous woman, even if she could be belligerent and self-preserving.

He never forgave her, because he never blamed her. He'd stopped blaming people, even if he hadn't quite figured out how to stop blaming himself. Only, he had nothing to blame himself for. Not really. Of course, he wasn't perfect, but most people, by his age, had done far worse things than he'd ever thought to do. He was far too afraid of the repercussions of defying any social mores, and he was too terribly afraid of hurting anyone to ever do anything particularly damaging.

And she knew all this about him. *How moronically, delusionally immobilizing that is*, she thought. She wished that she could punch him, sometimes, right in the face, right in the mouth, even, or maybe in the nose. They say that the nose hurts more, but punching that stupid, pretty mouth might be more gratifying. And then, she felt awful for thinking these things. She tried not to show him how angry he sometimes made her. What if he wouldn't put up with it? He probably would, but what if not? She might never forgive herself if that were the case. And she'd been terribly mean to him as it was. And she'd done awful things without his knowing. Sometimes, she wondered if she deserved him, but she never let her mind reside with this thought for too long. She was afraid of where it might lead her.

He spilt his tea, and began to quietly sob. He turned away from her, holding his face in his palms, looking directly at the floor. He hated how annoyed she got, sometimes. But now, in an instant, she went from irritated to worried. The skin between her eyes began to bunch up, and formed thin lines where her eyebrows curled up at their ends. She set down her book and briskly walked over to him, wrapping her arms around him, and gently rubbing his upper-arm. He'd slumped his shoulders and hung his head, making himself appear smaller than

he really was. He turned his face away from hers, and she asked, "What's wrong?"

He gasped, and exhaled, loudly and forcefully. "What am I even doing? What am I doing to you? I'm so afraid of you, and you could be with someone who could make you so much happier. I'm all alone, apart from you. I mean, sure; there are plenty of people who know me and seem to like me, but if they knew me – if they *actually* knew me – what would they think? I mean, surely people look at us strange, and surely people recognize that there's something wrong in this. People look at me, and they think, 'That's that failure of a weasel of a man. He had so much potential, and he had everything that he ever needed.' What about poor people? God, if I were poor, and I knew someone like me, I'd absolutely hate that guy. I'd want to punch that guy. Or maybe, I'd just want to shake the hell out of him, so that he'd realize that he had everything. How old am I today? Do you know?"

She felt guilty now, and she paused, not sure if he really expected a response. "Oh – uh, 44, right? The sexiest, loveliest, most pleasing forty-four year old, insecure, whiny bastard I know," she said with a huge, mischievous grin. You couldn't see her eyes when she smiled like this.

He looked in her eyes, the corners of his lips drawn up, and tight to his face. "You think you're so damn cute." She smiled at him, playfully. "I'm being serious," he said.

Her mouth opened wide: "So am I!" Her mouth didn't seem to move, despite the varied sounds coming from it. He feigned disgust at her. "Look –," she said, "I know that you feel that you've failed, but the truth is that you're really not so bad. Not at all. Beautiful, wealthy men hit on me all day, every day, and for some stupid reason, I still come to bed with you. Whatever reasons I have might be stupid, but at least they're something, you know?"

Perturbed, he pulled away from her, and asked, "Beautiful, wealthy men, huh?"

"Well-endowed, too!" she responded, with a little, exuberant hop.

"You're such an ass." He started to pace to the other side of the room, stopping in the middle, and turning back toward her.

"You love it. You love my ass!" She turned, briefly, to demonstrate.

"How would you know if they're well-endowed, anyway? And has feminism dictated that it's alright to punch a lady, if she's being particularly bratty?"

"Nope! Sorry! If this were earlier times, then you could probably slap me, and no one would make much fuss, but according to the old movies that you make me watch, it doesn't seem like it's ever been in vogue to punch a lady."

"I guess we're calling you a lady, huh?" He started to pace to the other side of the room, stopping in the middle and turning back toward her. "And happy birthday, to me, I suppose."

She made a deliberate, sarcastic frown, "Oh, poor you! You're getting so old, and no one will ever marry you! I highly advise that you just keep sleeping with me. I'll tolerate all your whiny, annoying behavior for at least a few more weeks, I've decided, and it's not like you'll do any better any time soon. Further, I really love that chair against the wall over there, and I'm right in the middle of this book, so as long as you'll keep feeding me, I'm happy to keep you company, assuming that you don't demand too much of my attention."



"What book are you reading?" he asked.

"*How To Annoy Your Cute, But Pathetic Boyfriend*, by Jean-Paul Sartre," she responded.

"Sartre, huh? Even your sarcastic, made-up self-help books are pretentious?!"

She laughed. "Oh, you..."

"Why do you love me?" he asked.

"You've never loved a stupid, sheepish puppy before? A little cast-off mutt? You're like this bourgeois, entitled, little, pathetic man-mutt, who never knew that he was a bourgeois, entitled mutt; one that did all he could to wash himself of his White Guilt, but never washed off any of the white or any of the guilt. Here you are, having spent all this money trying to save the world, trying to save yourself, and all you did was throw it all away. You didn't learn much of anything, except how to not be arrogant, and how to be deferential. A lot of people would find it unappealing, but I've never been too into the macho sort. Macho guys can make for a nice dream, here or there; they can be a good fantasy, but then you wake up, and their brains are all filled with limp noodles, tits – always big, stupid tits – and things like cars, gold, and sports. I mean, they're cute, but dating them would be like dating kitten videos on YouTube."

She paused. "The benefits are limited. And then, of course, on the other hand, you realize that there are dim, unaware, old men, with wrinkly balls, and just enough money to always leave you wanting more. It's enough to make any girl swoon. As a matter of fact, though, I do like your vast collection of incredible books. Maybe your mother had good taste in books. Surely, you've read five or eight of these."

"So, what I took away from that was that I'm not as stupid or shallow as some other men, and that I treat people better than some others do. That is why you love me?"

He looked resigned. *Maybe he's losing motivation in this quest for validation*, she thought. "Why do you have to make it sound so moderately appealing? I like it that you're not arrogant. Let's try to not ruin that, okay, sugar-dumpling?"

"You know, I wonder if you're good for me, in any way at all." He said, frowning slightly, but still vulnerable beneath his expression.

"Oh, stop... you love me. I tease you, but you like it. I'm sorry that you're having a bad day. I dread this day each year."

"You've only known me for twenty months!" he exclaimed.

She looked at him with exasperation. "What?! So because you don't have any children, you have to infantilize our relationship? Who the hell keeps up with the number of months they've been in a relationship with someone?!"

"I'm like the relationship Rain Man – it's a gift and a curse."

*At least he's showing some sense of humor*, she thought. "What kind of gift is that? What's its use, but to annoy and creep out your girlfriend? Maybe we're moving up our breakup date. Let me see..." She looked up, as though to count.

"Josie," he pleaded.

She couldn't resist anything from him when he said her name. She couldn't defy him, couldn't even tease him when he did that; she turned all soft and gooey. She could always feel it on her face, and she wondered how obvious it was. It felt,



to her, like the surface of her face got ten degrees warmer, and sagged and smiled at the same time. Surely, he knew the effect that this had on her, but she couldn't be even slightly mad at him for it. She loved it; she actually, very badly, wanted him to exploit it.

"Yes, dear?" she said, in a voice that was several times smaller than the voice she had spoken in up to that point. Suddenly, her voice seemed, to her, like an immeasurably small squeak, and not the commanding, brazen voice of the character that she so-often portrayed. She was a fearful lady, a vulnerable woman: sensitive, and apt to incurring pain, but her behavior so often demonstrated something quite contrary to that.

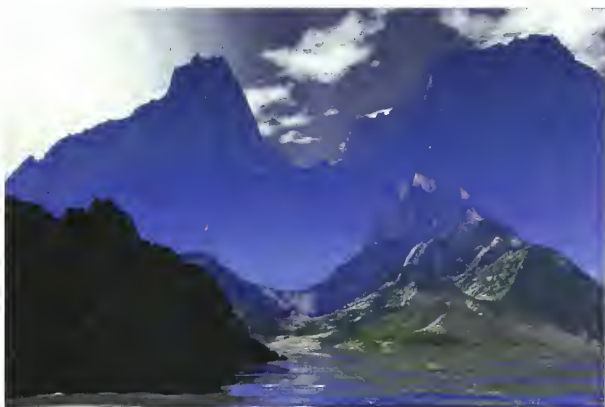
"Will you please just hold me? I love it when you hold me, and I could really use it right now."

"Of course I will; anything you want."

He grabbed her hand, and she slid her shoes and stockings off, as she followed him to bed.



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